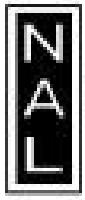
Eileen Clymer Schwab

Promise & Bridge



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Praise for Promise Bridge

“Eileen Clymer Schwab’s debut novel takes us to the antebellum South to offer us the story of a friendship between two remarkable young women: Hannalore Blessing, a Southern belle, and Livie, a runaway slave. Defying the casual brutality of slave hunters and slave owners, Livie and Hannah become fully human to each other, forming a bond that transcends the narrow categories of race and social class. *Promise Bridge* is a courageous novel that never ceases to surprise and delight with unexpected twists and startling revelations. In it we find life lived to the fullest, not by the motto ‘what if?’ but by the motto ‘why not?’”

—Mary Mackey, author of The Widow’s War

“*Promise Bridge* is a stunning debut that is sure to become a classic. With gorgeous writing and characters you’ll come to love, Eileen Clymer Schwab has written a beautiful story of a young woman’s awakening during the volatile years preceding the Civil War.”

—Maryann McFadden, author of The Richest Season and So Happy Together

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To All Those
known and unknown
who dreamed,
who dared,
who delivered us
to a better place and time.

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And last but not least, I hold dear the "Big Snack," a family tradition in which countless precious memories and my love for storytelling are rooted.

Often inspiration is born of stirred emotion. “Love Can Build a Bridge” written by John Barlow Jarvis, Naomi Judd, and Paul Overstreet, performed by The Judds, Wynonna and Naomi—your beautiful song stirred my heart.

Chapter 1

Life at its very core changed forever the day I asked “please” of a colored man. I intended no harm or outrage; my manners got the better of me is all. In fact, the cedar mounts cradling Echo Ridge all but quaked the moment the word floated from my careless lips as I eased a heavy bundle toward Winston’s outstretched arms. His playful eyes stoned into a stunned gaze, and though with two hasty blinks the ever-present smile recovered across his mahogany face, my heart sank into the pit of my stomach as his eyes hedged from mine and braced for the inevitable.

On the steps of the general store behind me, Twitchell Grayson stood with his worn snakeskin boot fixed heavily on a stool. Winston’s son, Elijah, knelt at Twitch’s crooked heel, wiping away dusty clumps of dried clay as best he could with a fistful of oil rag in his capable ten-year-old hand. Following Winston’s glance, I turned in time to see Twitch’s jaw clench fiercely around the stub of a cigar wedged beneath the coarse charcoal mustache thicketed like a horseshoe around a barely recognizable mouth.

“You forget your place, boy?” Twitch kicked the stool against a crested apple barrel wedged alongside the mercantile door. Poor Elijah tumbled backward onto his threadbare britches as an avalanche of ripe red apples plunked down around him.

“No, sah, I’s jes’ helpin’ Miz Hannah,” Winston said with a compliant nod in my direction.

“Seems to me if you did your work proper, your mistress wouldn’t have to ask you for nothin’, much less beg you *please*.”

Twitch had one dead eye, blinded long ago, when for perverse amusement he propped up a peach basket using a stick and a string, with the aim of trapping crows. I never heard such depraved whooping and hollering as when he held each captured bird by its feet, swinging it over his head while he stomped and danced around me until I dropped to my knees in tears. My frantic pleas made his wild eyes glimmer with savage excitement as he spat into the palm of his hands, then twisted off the wings of each

disoriented crow before tossing them onto the dirt. I remember how he howled with laughter as they flopped helplessly on the ground at his feet. Seven young crows were tortured by Twitch that wretched day, until my cries brought my dear friend Colton racing like a guard dog across the upper meadow, barreling headfirst into his longtime nemesis. The two boys hit the ground with a thud, and when Twitch lost his grip on the mother crow, she bounded loose in a flutter of feathers and delivered two fierce pecks to his unprotected face, taking the sight of one eye as revenge for the dark, lifeless mounds scattered across the blanket of heather surrounding us.

Being close to him in age, I had watched Twitch grow from a devilish boy into an ill-tempered, deviant young man who now found the same wicked pleasure in clipping the wings of the errant flocks some say migrate northward through the night.

“Slave catchin’ is a messy business,” he often boasted upon returning from one of his monthlong missions across the western mountain peaks into northern Kentucky. “If any ol’ sucker could do it, there wouldn’t be no slaves to catch.”

I suppose it was one of the few truths he ever spoke, but I paid him no mind. All I knew was, whatever his unseemly trade entailed, it took him far off from the Ridge, allowing us to maintain a peaceful balance despite the growing unrest whispering beyond the mountains on the Virginia horizon.

Now, with my milky cheeks flushing in the warm spring breeze, I wished I had taken notice of him as I carried Aunt Augusta’s purchases to the carriage. In three charging strides, Twitch stood nose to nose with Winston. Disguising my terror with one flutter of my Southern belle eyes, I tugged at the sheepskin vest hanging from Twitch’s bony frame.

“Oh, leave him be, Twitch,” I pleaded politely. “He didn’t do anything.” The roll of my Virginia drawl, a subtle mix of hill-country twang and Southern society, was as unmoving as the determined scowl chiseled on Twitch’s craggy face. My weakly delivered attempt at interceding on Winston’s behalf went unheeded as Twitch unraveled his bullwhip from his belt.

“Get over to the livery stable, boy,” Twitch said as he spat what remained of his soggy cigar across Winston’s muslin shirt. Jutting his whiskered chin toward the wagon house across the dusty street, Twitch raised his whip and with one long swirl cracked it at Winston’s feet.

“Hannalore Blessing,” snapped a shrill voice behind me. “A proper young lady would be sitting in the carriage, unengaged in slave matters.”

My face paled beneath the starched brim of my cotton bonnet as I stepped back in muted obedience and allowed Aunt Augusta’s tall, prim figure to march past my lowered eyes. Though she was my dear, departed mother’s only sister, I feared her as you would a resentful and domineering marm of an orphanage. My eyes lifted with false courage once I realized she was wasting no venom on me.

“What is the meaning of this, Twitchell?” she demanded with a cool arch to her brow. “You have no right to lay a whip against my property.”

“I mean no disrespect, Augusta,” Twitch said with a tug of his frayed slouch hat. “But this thickheaded buck is makin’ familiar notions that ain’t proper for his kind to presume outside his own. Partic’arly with a young lady of such fine and privileged upbringin’ as Miss Hannah.”

My voice rose in protest, though my mutterings were quickly swallowed as Aunt Augusta silenced me with a frosty glance. Still, her fierce presence gave me hope for Winston’s safety. Not even Twitch would dare challenge the mistress of one of the longest-established plantations in the county. Her wealth and standing were second only to that of her husband’s brother, Mooney Reynolds, who boasted two hundred acres of tobacco and hogs. When I became Aunt Augusta’s ward, I was required to address him as Uncle Mooney, though he was no uncle to me, by blood or affection. The fact that Twitch was Uncle Mooney’s overseer in slave matters would be of no concern to Aunt Augusta. Unlike her genteel Southern counterparts who only concerned themselves with the social duties associated with their husbands’ successful lot in life, Aunt Augusta was a force to be reckoned with. Widowed nearly fifteen years before, Aunt Augusta maintained a modest but highly profitable tobacco plantation beyond the foul breezes of Uncle Mooney’s hog pens. She bowed to no one, least of all the son of a drunkard murderer, who was hanged for slicing the throat of his young wife.

“Now, Augusta, this here buck may be yours, but overseein’ is my business. And none does it better than me. I seen plenty of them who rise up thinkin’ they deserve more, ’cuz no one beat sense into ’em when they start believin’ what them Yankee abolitionists say. We know how to handle our slaves here in this part o’ the Virginny hills. That’s why me and Mooney are

gettin’ rich fetchin’ them runaways over in Kentucky. They wanna know how come our stock stays put here on the Ridge, and I tell ’em its ’cuz Twitchell Grayson can smell a runaway from a hundred miles. Fact is, I can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voice before they even get a foot out the door. It all starts with the believin’. And I have a knack for whippin’ the believin’ out of them who needs it. No abolitionist is gonna find a believer in these parts. That’s why the path runnin’ north is worn bare across the bluegrass of Kentucky, but not even a paw print dares to cross these blue-shaded peaks of Echo Ridge.”

Twitch laughed heartily as he wiped the back of his hand across a trickle of brown tobacco juice moistening the hair framing the corners of his mouth. Aunt Augusta remained cool and unimpressed, although I knew from the Vigilance Committee meetings often held in the parlor of our home that she was a strong leader in opposition of the Northern-funded abolitionist movement pervading its way south. In spite of being the lone female in an organization of concerned men of commerce, it was often her voice I would hear above all others, making plans and outlining strategies that would keep their slave labor from being threatened. True to form, Aunt Augusta did not so much as blink an eye when she said, “Fine, Twitchell, do what needs to be done. But I will be making a trip to Cumberland Gap in two days, and I expect Winston to be at the reins of my carriage as he always is. I have no interest in breaking in another driver at this late date.”

“Don’t worry, Augusta. Your business won’t be interrupted on his account, even if it means draggin’ him up onto the wagon mount myself. But I guarantee, once I have his hide, he won’t be thinkin’ anyone owes him *please* for his efforts.”

“Be quick about it, then,” Aunt Augusta said as Twitch led Winston toward the stables. “I want to get these quilting supplies home.”

“Aunt Augusta,” I pleaded as she turned back toward the carriage, “don’t let him hurt Winston. It was entirely my fault.”

Her eyes bore into mine and grew harder as she approached. “Your foolishness has hurt Winston more than any bullwhip, my dear.” Her cold hand reached up and clenched me under the chin. “I have a reputation to uphold in this county and well beyond. I’ll not have you cast doubt on all I have worked for.”

The hiss of her words and sizzle of the whip blended as the distant crack ignited Winston's cry in the afternoon air. I took off and ran from the sound as fast as my feet would take me.

"Hannalore!"

Despite Aunt Augusta calling after me, the snap of another lash drove me into the thicket at the edge of town. The flounce trim on the bottom of my skirt tore as I escaped deeper into the woods and across the cedar knoll leading to the upper meadow. When I broke into the sunshine of the meadow, I pulled my bonnet from my head and collapsed into the plump milkweed. Using my bonnet to muffle my sobs, I thought of my mother and wished I had her arms around me, so I could feel the protective embrace of an understanding heart, and my feelings would not be scorned as foolishness. Stretched out on my back amid my tears and the scent of honeysuckle, I was, as always, alone and afraid.

"Hannah?" A deep, rugged voice floated down from above. "Why are you hiding here with the grasshoppers?"

I pulled the bonnet away from my swollen eyes and saw a shadowed face staring down at me.

"I do declare, Hannah, you look a sight. What has you running up here to the meadow all by yourself?"

Holding up a hand to block the brilliant rays that gleamed over the broad shoulders hovering above me, I saw the familiar gold-flecked brown eyes of the only soul on earth who would not judge me in my mortified state.

"Colton Reynolds, is that you?" I asked as he knelt down on one knee beside me. He leaned casually against the polished rifle propped at his side.

"Lucky for you, it is me and no one else, or you might be mistaken for one of those demon-possessed women they send to the state asylum to rest in respectable seclusion."

No one understood my secret emotional quandaries like dear Colt. Raised in the same extended family, he often witnessed the frustration and confusion I felt in the confinement of well-bred society. He was tall and lean, with loose chestnut curls that were in boyish contrast to the rugged cut of his cleft chin. His nose sloped handsomely toward his full mouth, where a crescent scar below his lower lip gave him an adorable poutiness whenever he was not smiling. Colt had none of Uncle Mooney's boorish traits, and his tender heart always sensed when I needed to cry my way

through a sorrow or giggle away a deep hurt. As he slid his gentle hand under my elbow and eased us both to our feet, I knew today would be no different. Even in my high-laced shoes, I barely reached his shoulder. I looked up into his concerned face, wondering where to begin.

Not rushing me to words, Colt stroked some loose locks of hair from my face and tucked them behind my ear as he waited for me to speak.

“I hate myself, Colt,” I finally burst. “I simply hate myself.”

“Now, Hannalore Blessing,” Colt said, his dark brow folding into a frown. “Stop talking so harshly about my favorite girl.”

“It’s true, Colt,” I shot back with a stomp. “I don’t have the stuffing to speak my mind or defy a scolding, even if I witness wrongdoing. I am just a coward who does as I am told even when every inch of me wants to do the opposite.”

Colt reached up and scratched behind his ear for a moment, then with a shrug gave up the thought of debating. “I suppose you are right, Hannah, but I don’t think you should hate yourself for doing what’s expected of you. There are things we have no choice in. Believe me, I understand. It’s hard being forced to go along with popular ways when every instinct within you pushes in a different direction.”

“How can it be hard for you, Colt? You are a man. And men do as they please, making their own decisions, coming and going as they see fit.”

Colt laughed with bitter amusement. “I wish it was that simple, Hannah, but I have expectations to fulfill just like you.” He hoisted his rifle up across his shoulder. “Do you know what I am doing out here? My father sent me out on a hunt. He says I am not to return home without something to skin. He says I am softhearted like my mother was, and he’s determined to toughen me into a man.”

“Why, that’s just silly, Colt,” I said, realizing he was feeling as wounded as I. “You are the finest man on this mountain, even though you are barely twenty-two years old.”

“Well, I am not one for taking the life of any creature, but I will make my father proud by doing as he says. I am as much a man as that hellion Twitch, even if Father says different. And I will not hate myself for proving it. Sometimes you have to accept things as they are, whether you like it or not. It’s part of growing up, Hannah.”

“Well, then, Colton Mooney, you are nothing but a big ol’ coward.”

“Shhh,” Colt shushed as he put a fingertip to my lips. Scanning the mulberry bushes and ragweed growing thick at the edge of the meadow, he drew in a deep breath. “I think there is a pheasant over there.”

No sooner had I looked in the direction of his nod than a subtle rustle moved across the brush. I stepped back as Colt slid the rifle from his shoulder and lifted its target sight to his fluttering eye. He slowly cocked the hammer and tightened his finger around the trigger. He held still for a breathless moment before relaxing his grip.

“You have nothing to prove, Colt,” I said, so he would not feel like a failure.

His finger tightened again. “Yes, I do, and it’s time this big ol’ coward proves it.”

With that, a shotgun blast echoed through the surrounding mountain canyons. Colt’s rifle kicked him back a step or two, and the burn of gunpowder filled the air.

“Aaaaaaeeeh!” An odd squeal came from within the thicket across the meadow. Colt and I stared at the rush of movement shaking the weeds where the shot was fired. The sharpness of the cry was muffled as quickly as it rose, then continued low and distressed.

“Good gracious, Colt,” I finally murmured. “What is that?”

“I’m not sure,” Colt said, lowering his rifle and moving toward the thicket. “Maybe it’s a wild turkey.”

Shadowing his footsteps, I held tight to the tail of his jacket. “I never heard a bird make such a desperate sound. Perhaps you hit a bobcat. Now, wouldn’t that make ol’ Uncle Mooney eat his sharp-tacked words?”

We stepped cautiously together through the elbow-high ragweed. Colt raised his rifle again as we neared the tall grass still pulsating with a low gurgle. “Stay behind me, Hannah,” Colt whispered as he probed the barrel of his gun low into the grass and gently parted the thicket before us, combing it to one side.

A stunned “Gracious be” rolled from my lips as there, hidden among the buzzing bees and grasshoppers, lay a wounded mahogany-skinned girl cradled in the powerful dark arms of a growling buck slave. He held one hand firmly over the terrified girl’s wrenching mouth and the other hand fisted like a shield between the sobbing girl and the cold steel of Colt’s lowered rifle.

“God have mercy!” Colt gasped as he staggered back against me. “I’ve shot a pickaninny.”

Without thinking, I ducked under his shoulder and knelt on the grass. The sallow whites of the wounded girl’s eyes grew wide as I reached out a hand toward her blood-soaked cotton dress. Her protector’s swift, callused fingers swiped between us and clamped fiercely around my forearm, bending my elbow up and away from the cowering girl, who was not a child, but, much like me, on the youthful brink of womanhood. His powerful grip tightened when I looked from my throbbing arm up into the hard determination of his unflinching face. The wild emotion of his eyes bore deep into mine, flashing fear and defiance in a way no living thing had ever looked at me. My heart skipped with terror as the rules and proprieties long understood and obeyed by all involved fell away in the still seclusion of the hushed meadow.

“Let go of her arm,” Colt said with recovered strength and resolve as he raised his rifle and pointed it down at the crouching aggressor’s glistening forehead. Colt’s targeted eye flickered above the metal sight of his gun as his command set off a scattering of a dozen other frantic, unseen souls retreating through the tall ragweed in every direction like voles laying tracks in a turnip patch.

“Runaways,” I whispered in utter astonishment. “Right here in Echo Ridge.” My vised arm pulled free as the clenched fingers loosened. The defiance that glared from the darkened eyes moments earlier, now drained into a surrendering gaze; the image of a defeated warrior realizing he was abandoned by his troops before the battle had even begun.

“Oooooh,” the wounded girl moaned, curling like a ball of yarn with her hands pressed against her right hip. From his knees, her protector gathered her into his arms; then he carefully leaned his broad cheek against the end of Colt’s rifle barrel, yielding his threatening pose to one of submission.

“Don’t care what you do to me,” he said, as if sensing the sympathic tug of my heart. “Jes’ gots’ta get help for my sister.” He flinched again as I reached toward the girl, but relaxed as I moved slowly and gently to pull open the strawberry-sized hole in her reddened dress. His face loomed near my ear as I wiped the blood thickening across the girl’s wound. My hair, pulled neatly behind my ear in the sanctity of my bedroom at sunrise, fell loose and swayed in rhythm with his breath across my down-turned face. I

sorrowed at the girl's trembling, until I realized it was my own hand shaking with fear. What were we to do? I imagined Aunt Augusta's shrill voice in my head, saying, *"Hannalore Blessing, a proper young lady should not be engaged in slave matters."* A runaway slave was always a serious matter, to my recollection, but in recent years it had become a fiery issue. Any proof, or mere suspicion, of man or woman entertaining a sympathetic notion toward runaways and the beliefs of the North resulted in shunning, beating, destruction of property, or worse. My thoughts never dwelled on it much because Echo Ridge was a secluded town protected from the uprisings along the border territories to our north and west. I was content in my oblivion, I suppose. But I never expected oblivion to be here in front of me; breathing, bleeding, and needing my help. The twinge of compassion in my heart and the burn of fear in my belly challenged me to act as I believed rather than adhere to the expected.

Gracious be, I suppose *proper* never suited me anyway.

Chapter 2

Touching my fingers to the small, hardened knob under the flesh of the wounded girl's hip, I glanced back at Colt. "Feels like it's wedged against the bone."

"That don't sound good," the gruff buck snorted through my dangling hair.

Afraid to engage the renegade slave, I forced my eyes to remain fixed on Colt. "It could be worse. The bone kept the pellet from going into her belly. The same thing happened last year, when Twitch had a snoot full of brandy, and he decided to use Willy Jack for target practice. Remember? If we settle her and stop the bleeding, we should be able to help her."

"Hannah! Are you crazy?" Colt's shadow glided over the three of us. I stood and intercepted Colt, who was still clinging to his pointed rifle.

"Put your gun down, Colt," I said, using my hand to ease the barrel down and away to avoid another accidental shooting. "They mean us no harm."

Colt's jaw clenched with tension. "But they are *runaways*."

"Does it look like this poor girl is up to running anywhere? Now, we must figure out what to do."

"What's there to do, Hannah? It's not like finding a baby robin fallen from its nest. We have no choice here. Perhaps it is best if you run on home so I can decide what should be done with the two of them."

"I shall do no such thing, Colton Mooney. What have you a mind to do? Why, you'll probably march them right down to the Ridge so that hateful viper Twitch can chain them to his wagon and drag them back to wherever they came from. What are you going to do, wrestle him for the reward money?"

"Hannah," Colt whispered with a fretful wince. "Is that what you think of me?"

Guilt instantly snuffed the fire building in me. Of course Colt was nothing like Twitch, but his conforming nature blocked any other options from consideration. The thought of turning them over to Twitch was

unacceptable to me. I reached up and touched Colt's cheek. "Under the circumstances, maybe you are the one who should go along home."

He shook his head decisively. "You know I can't do—" Colt's words were cut short by what at first sounded like geese honking through the distant clouds. Colt's eyes locked with mine as the sound sharpened into frantic, bellowing hound dogs deep in the pines sloping from the far end of the meadow toward the family acreage and river beyond.

"We gots'ta go," the male slave grunted as he struggled to his feet, with his sister moaning in his arms. "Them's trackin' dogs!"

I grabbed Colt by the sleeve. "There is no time for debate. Please help me hide them."

His wild eyes searched mine for an avenue of reason. When he found none, and the savage yelps grew nearer, Colt pulled his hat from his head and fisted it in frustration. Then pointing to a path parting the stony ridge behind us, he said, "Up toward the peak to Copperhead Cave."

"Perfect," I exclaimed, pulling him down close enough to plant a kiss of relief on his cheek. "I knew you would never let me down."

"Not another moment." He held his arms wide and herded the three of us through the weeds until we reached the shadow of Echo Ridge's rising mount. Colt motioned me to lead the way up the narrow path winding out of sight and into the crevassed terrain ahead. From the grunts of the runaway behind me, I knew he was struggling to keep his footing as he carried his wounded sister up through the twists and turns of the mountainside. Halfway there, he paused to catch his breath and shift the girl in his arms. Colt stepped forward and lifted the girl from the man's exhausted embrace. Without missing a stride, Colt continued onward. The runaway trotted on Colt's heels, eyeballing him with a distrustful frown.

I could navigate this route with my eyes closed, having traced these steps hundreds of times in the twelve years since misfortune brought me to Aunt Augusta's emotionally barren household. One of the few joys I held dear was the friendship and adventure Colt and I shared, sneaking off from monotonous chores to pick blackberries and swim in the brisk, sparkling waters of Emerald Cove. Not far beyond this secluded mountain gorge was a serene hollow within a forest of knotted pine and white birch that gave way to a ridge of mossy rock formations. Amid these rocks was an entrance, no bigger than a wagon wheel, opening into a cave as wide as a

dozen corn cribs. Inside, a luminous beam of sunshine cut through the darkness above us where the rocks gaped enough to give light by day and serve as a warm fire's smoke flue by night.

"You are well hidden here," Colt said as he settled the girl back into the runaway's arms. "I'll fetch some evergreen boughs so she can rest comfortably." With that, Colt disappeared out the exit.

With our thoughts and reactions unfolding so quickly, I had not given thought to what would come next, or consider the repercussions if we were discovered. Fretful notions tightened in my bosom as the runaway and I cast wary glances at each other. It was an unsteadying anxiety, much like approaching a stray dog whose unblinking stare masks whether it will wag its tail or bite a hand. The isolation of the cave magnified the awkwardness and left me wondering if the protector was pondering similar thoughts.

"Hush now, Livetta," he said tenderly. "Nobody gonna wrestle you from me. Not even the Lord Almighty hisself."

Well-bred manners along with a lack of anything better to say had me murmuring in their direction, "My name is Hannah." They both looked over at me with guarded nods. I realized it was the first time I had spoken directly to them, a fact that struck me odd under the circumstances. But then again, Aunt Augusta had always made a conscious effort of keeping my interactions with the slave help at a minimum. Other young ladies of my needlepoint circle spoke with great affection of mammies who coddled them like mothers, and of grandfatherly storytellers who entertained them with tall tales and Bible musings. I, on the other hand, hadn't enough interaction with either the field or house slaves to form any meaningful attachments. The exception was Winston, who as coachman drove us to social and dutiful outings. Winston's mother, Granny Morgan, was in charge of the cookhouse, and her presence in our kitchen made her equally attentive toward me.

"They call me Marcus," the protector said with an intense directness that left me stammering an unintelligible response. I had never been left unattended with a stranger, let alone with a man whose musky, dark skin glistened at me from the shadows. Colt's voice saved me from my reeling senses.

"Hannah, give me a hand with these branches," Colt called out as he pushed an armful of snapped evergreens through the cave entrance. I

blinked free of Marcus's clutching eyes, but felt them pulling at me, daring me to look his way again. My shameful thoughts reminded me that a young lady with my upbringing should maintain the appearance of disinterest and superior restraint. I quickly gathered the boughs Colt tossed inside and arranged them into soft bedding for the slave girl, Livetta. Colt slipped his coat off and threw it over the needles. As Marcus lowered his sister onto the makeshift pallet, I pulled my bonnet from my pocket and tucked it under her head.

Colt knelt near the girl and eyed the fresh blood leaking through the tear in her dress. He spoke to Marcus, who knelt opposite him. "Can I have your neckerchief?"

Marcus untied the faded blue chambray cloth knotted loosely around his broad neck and handed it to Colt. Colt wrapped an end in each fist and strained until it frayed apart into two pieces.

"She gonna be all right?" Marcus asked.

Colt carefully fingered the hole in Livetta's dress, then tore it wide enough to shove one piece of the cloth in against the wound. "This will help stop the bleeding for now." As Colt moved to his feet, Marcus stood with him.

Marcus jutted his chin toward the cloth still wrapped around Colt's hand. "What you gonna do with the other piece?"

"I thought it best if I went down to the meadow to see about those hounds. If they are sniffing after you, I'll use what's left of your neckerchief to drag your scent in the direction of the river."

I was amazed Colt was being so nonchalantly clever. He was always bright and schooled in ways that most of the farm boys from these parts rarely cared to aspire to, but this was out of character even for him. A worrisome thought tugged inside me, making me wonder if dear Colt had something else in mind. He was a predictable soul who could be counted on to do what was expected of him. And we both knew that what we were engaged in was in direct conflict with all expectations of a Southern gentleman. He was no heroic upstart shaking his fist at the ways of the world, like the fiery Northern abolitionists cursed by the locals in every tavern, on every street corner, and hearthside from Richmond to Charleston. Colt had simple hopes and needs, and they were to be a good son, a good

friend, and a good man. I said a quick prayer that being a good friend would outweigh the other two at this moment.

“Will you be comfortable here until I get back?” Colt’s question startled me from my thoughts.

“I will be fine,” I said, lowering my voice to a whisper. “Now, don’t you go and do anything foolish, Colton Reynolds.”

Colt glared at me, then stepped back with harnessed indignation. His eyes revealed a strange glimmer and his chest inflated as if words were rising from his belly. But his mouth clenched and the words were swallowed. Instead, he turned and handed me his rifle.

“This is all the protection you have,” he said. “Keep it at your side and use it if needed.” Then, without further instruction, Colt disappeared through the jagged hole in the cave wall, leaving me alone and uneasy with our reluctant foundlings. I clutched the rifle against my breast to steady my shaking hands, as my head swirled with an equal mix of fascination and fear.

Chapter 3

"W*e should spark a fire befo' it gets too dark," Marcus said as he unbuttoned his shirt and laid it across his dozing sister. My eyes were drawn to the darkened scars crossing his back like latticework. When he turned toward me, the beam of light from above cascaded across his bare chest, highlighting its smooth, deep color. He caught me in my curiosity, and I flushed when he shifted his stance slightly so the light could illuminate two long scars halving his body from right shoulder to left hip. There in the heavenly glow, Marcus wore the markings on his chest with pride and fierceness, unlike the lines on his back. He allowed me my peeking glances until my bold regard caused my cheeks to tingle with embarrassment. His blank stare dared me to ask about his scars, but instead I ran my hand along the gun barrel propped against my hip. I truly did not know what to make of this creature. Yet try as I might to disengage, I could not take my eyes off of him.

"I don't know how to make a fire," I finally mustered.

A bemused grumble rose in his throat. "Ain't surprised. You look like a fine missus, which means you prob'ly don't know nothin' about nothin'."

I would have been offended by his remark if what he said had not been true. But I had a prideful streak too, so I threw back my shoulders and huffed. "Well, I may not know how to do much, but I am doing *this*," I said, motioning toward the girl. "Perhaps you should be a bit grateful."

He tipped his head slightly and puzzled over me a moment. "Fair enough," he finally said as he brushed by me with an impatient smirk. "But *grateful* ain't a word I rightly use." Marcus turned and paused in the cave entrance. His eyes surveyed the forest beyond. Satisfied there were no slave catchers lying in wait for him, he crawled out, then popped his head back inside. "I'm fetchin' some wood for a fire. You sit with Livetta till I get back. And unless you is fixin' to blow a second hole in her, I would set yo' gun aside. I think it's done enough harm for one day."

Once Marcus had gone, I nudged sheepishly in Livetta's direction to get a closer look. I sat alongside her on the pine needles and watched her short,

troubled breaths. I put Colt's rifle aside, although well within reach should I need it. The cloth Colt had pressed into her wound was partially blood soaked. However, the stains were not bright red, but rather a brownish shade of crimson, indicating the blood was stagnant and drying. Livetta's teardrop face was dark and waxy, with barely a mark or blemish except for a small, round birthmark below her left eye. Its blackness punctuated her cherrywood complexion, and her hair was pulled in tight braids behind each ear. Tiny curls spiraled free along her forehead, and a smattering of twigs and grass poked throughout the coarse strands matted to her head. I reached to pull a hemlock leaf from one of her braids when her eyes popped open with a gasp. She lifted the back of her hand across her face as if bracing to be struck.

"I don't wish to hurt you, Livetta," I said, as she peered between her fingers. I tugged the leaf free and held it up to her as proof. "You see?"

Blinking at my words, she lowered her hand and the air of fear dissipated between us. Her expression changed to one of confusion. She did not speak, though a hundred thoughts could be seen dancing in her eyes. She lay still, watching me until her lids squeezed shut and her mouth opened in a silent wail. Livetta pressed the palm of her hand over her wound and sobbed softly.

"Don't cry, girl," Marcus hushed as he twisted through the entrance with one arm clutching a pile of brown, deadened pine branches, and the other dragging a decaying tree stump the size of a steer's head, horn to horn. He dropped them in the center of the cave, then moved to Livetta's side. Marcus rested his hand on her head and brushed his thumb from the bridge of her nose upward over her forehead.

"You feel cold and damp, sister," he said with a frown. "Marcus is gonna warm you up like biscuits risin' in the hot sunshine." Marcus paced the center of cave, stopping every other stride to knock the heel of his torn brogans against the crusty dirt floor. Directly under the rock flue, his foot thudded into soft soil. He dropped to his hands and knees, then burrowed his fingers into the ground, pushing a mound of soil to one side to reveal a blackened bed of dead ash beneath the overturned dirt.

"Well, looky here," Marcus said to nobody in particular. "Somebody already done dug us a fire pit." He then reached for the pile of harvested pines and began patiently pulling each branch through his fist. As he pulled,

a shower of dry needles toppled into the hole until each branch was stripped bare and a hefty blanket of needles filled the ditch. Paying no mind to me, Marcus continued on, snapping the branches to a uniform size and standing them up against each other over the bed of needles like a miniature Indian tepee. Digging deep in his pocket, he pulled out two flint rocks no bigger than a pig's eye. Holding them down at the edge of the ditch, Marcus skillfully struck one to the other without pause until a wisp of smoke began rising from the sparked, dry needles. Soon a small fire was crackling within the tented branches, and once the flames took hold, Marcus broke off a section of the stump and positioned it until the wood ignited with a hiss, creating a comforting glow within the dimming cave.

"Why doesn't Livetta speak?" I asked as I moved opposite Marcus and sat next to the fire.

Not feeling the need to look up at me, Marcus coaxed the fire to life with a long stick. With each poke, bursts of sparks swarmed above our heads like angry bees tormented from their hive. "What'chu want her to say? 'Thanks for shootin' me; I am much obliged'?"

"I didn't shoot her," I stated firmly. "Anyway, it was an accident."

"Don't matter." He shrugged to distance himself from me. "Ain't breakin' no laws spillin' the blood of a colored."

I paused for a moment before answering. "It matters to me. Why, I wouldn't swat a fly even if it landed in the middle of my breakfast marmalade."

"Well, Livetta ain't no fly!" he said with a fierce jab, sending a cloud of smoke and sparks to the ceiling. "Point is, she don't have to talk to the likes of you if she don't wanna."

We sat in silence with nothing but the crackling fire to ease the tension between us. From the angle of the late-day sun bending through the smoky opening above, I surmised I should begin my trek back down the mountain. Aunt Augusta would surely question me if I returned after sundown. I thought about Winston and the whipping he had taken because of me. So much had happened since I ran off from town. I never could have imagined my footsteps were leading me here, to a secret cavern with two runaways. Was I trying to ease my guilt? If so, it wasn't working. I could make no sense of my actions, and like Winston had earlier, I knew who would pay for my mistakes if we were found out.

The pounding of boots through the brush outside froze Marcus's eyes to mine. He leapt up and broke off a leg of the stump and wielded it in his hands as he backed into the shadows. I rushed to Livetta's bed and grabbed the gun. I turned and pointed it at the entrance just as Colt squeezed through with a large cotton satchel slung across his shoulder.

"It was only Mac Prentiss hunting rabbit."

"Mac?" I said as I let the rifle relax in my grip.

"The hounds," he answered as he dropped the sack at his feet. "Mac Prentiss was hunting rabbit in the hollows between the meadow and the river. But just to be safe, I ran down along the riverbank with the neckerchief and rubbed scent on some rocks and trees. I tossed it in the current so it couldn't be tracked back up here."

My jaw dropped in amazement, because I feared when Colt returned it would be on the shoulder of Uncle Mooney and Twitch, armed with leg irons and bullwhips. But to my relief, Colt's loyalty to me had spared Livetta and Marcus, at least for the moment. What would happen beyond today was a thought I chased from my mind. Yet part of me could not help wondering why I cared so much.

"I doubled back to West Gate for some supplies," he said, as Marcus reappeared from the shadows. Colt emptied the sack, which contained two wool blankets, a generous slice of cheese, and several pieces of corn bread wrapped in linen cloth. "It isn't much, but I did not want to arouse suspicion."

He arranged the offerings together and handed them to Marcus, who accepted the food without hesitation. Colt stood and warmed his hands by the fire. "I see you found my burning pit."

"These yo' chicken bones too?" Marcus said, pointing to a collection of bones scattered in the shadows nearby.

"I sometimes come here at night when I'm hunting raccoon," Colt said with an anxious tug of his ear. "There's a bucket behind the rock over there. You can use it to fetch water from the stream up over the next hill."

Marcus offered nothing more than a grudging nod of his head. He studied Colt with confused disdain. "Why you helpin' us?"

"You best move on by tomorrow," Colt said, with stern warning. "It's not safe for you in these parts, do you understand?"

Colt turned and looked at me with a flat expression that was out of character for him, and therefore I did not know how to interpret its meaning. He took the rifle from me and grabbed me roughly by the elbow. Before I had a chance to speak, he had me at the cave's entrance. With one last hard glare, he turned to Marcus. "You are on your own now."

As we parted, I somehow knew the four of us were not likely to untangle so easily.

Chapter 4

Beaming warm against my right cheek, the western sun settled low in the sky as Colt and I retraced our steps down from the peak. We spoke not one word, though the message I received was clear: I was shamed for putting him in such a precarious position. What I chose for myself was one thing. . . . However, what I brought on someone else was another matter entirely.

When we reached the upper fields of Hillcrest, Colt and I stood silent along the tree line, taking in the view. The greening tobacco acreage lay before us, sloping down to the main house. It sat majestic and picturesque on a knoll to our left where the rear of the house overlooked a wooded ridge that receded to the Red Hawk River. The river's flow bent southward around the town of Echo Ridge, which nestled out of sight in a vale beyond the plantation limits. Whitewashed fence posts framed a red dirt road stretching across the front yard to the carriage house sitting below us on the right. The lane turned southward, and divided the lower fields like a rusty plow cutting its way through the acreage below. The road sliced through the distant hickory timberline before disappearing in the direction of town. West of the carriage house and farther to our right, the property dropped into a stretch of sunken flatland known as Mud Run, where the slave quarters huddled among the hickory trees. I watched Elijah carry a bucket of water to his mother, Esther Mae, who stood, hands on hips, in the doorway of their cabin.

"Aunt Augusta has returned from town," I said, motioning toward Mud Run. "I see Elijah tending his chores. He was at the mercantile with us and witnessed his father's run-in with Twitch."

"I see no sign of Winston," Colt said.

The peacefulness of the view was whisked away by the thought of Winston. His routine usually brought him to the open doors of the carriage house at this time of day. Without fail, he could be found brushing down the horses in the glow of the setting sun. His absence weighted my heart and forced my eyes across the tobacco fields toward West Gate.

Because of the sharp drop of the fields in the distance, only the upper half of West Gate peered over the hill. The wood-shingled rooftops of the barn and sties dropped out of sight beyond the house, and though the pigs and hogs could rarely be heard from where we stood, an indignant turn of the wind reminded us of their presence. In the crook of the mountainside edging its way northward from Uncle Mooney's homestead was a two-story carriage house where Twitch lived above the wagons and horses. Behind the carriage house and hidden in the pines were two makeshift outbuildings and a wire dog pen, where Twitch kept his bloodthirsty hounds. The back lot was draped in eeriness. Everyone, including Uncle Mooney, kept their distance from it. West Gate's slave quarters dotted the hillside of Uncle Mooney's upper fields and were the only part of his estate that rose high enough for us to see completely from our front porch. There were twice as many cabins on the far hill than at Hillcrest, although half of West Gate's slave force worked Aunt Augusta's tobacco fields, an arrangement that profited Uncle Mooney nearly as much as his Virginia hams.

"You must not speak of this to anyone, Hannah."

I looked over at Colt; he stood stiff and gazing straight ahead. He was an honest and forthright man, and the strain of our actions was evident in the furrow of his brow.

"Do you think they will be all right?"

"It's done, Hannah," he said, turning to me with tired eyes. "Whatever their fate . . ." He paused to find the right words. "It is out of our hands. Do you understand?"

I suppose he wanted some gesture of agreement from me, but mostly I felt turned upside down. A sigh was all I could muster. "I better return to Hillcrest and face the punishment Aunt Augusta has in wait for me. She was enraged by my indiscretion in town."

Colt took my elbow and turned me to face him. "Forget what happened in town. It is the indiscretion that followed that should frighten you. This is not a little girl's game, Hannah. If anyone ever finds out what we did, we'll have hell brought down upon us. You must purge them from your mind, or Augusta's wrath will be the least of your worries."

A chill ran down my spine upon hearing Colt's warning. I hiked my skirt off my ankles and took off down through the fields toward Hillcrest. I heard Colt calling after me, "Remember what I said."

I continued running until I reached the yard. There I slowed and caught my breath before going inside. I brushed my soiled skirt as best I could, then stepped softly up the porch steps and through the front door. Inside, the house was blanketed in stillness except for the sound of Winston's mother, Granny Morgan, who was busy bringing in supper from the cookhouse out back. Most of the food was prepared there and then brought into the kitchen, where she arranged it for Esther Mae to serve. Her lowly voice sang a sorrowful tune that stirred a guilt-ridden ache inside me, so I rushed up the stairs to the second floor and retreated down the hallway to my bedchamber.

The pale rose of my window dressings and bedcovers welcomed me from the strange events of the day. I closed the door and drew in a long, calming breath. My room cornered the front of the house nearest the peak. It was the smallest room on the second floor, but had two windows that kept it airy and bright. The view from the front window peered across the front yard to where our land dipped into the southern tip of Mud Run. Looming from the adjoining valley were the head and shoulders of West Gate, poised in the shadows, watching and judging me.

The second window overlooked the side yard in the direction of the upper fields. Pulling the silk window dressings aside, I saw Colt making his way across the upper tree line before disappearing over the hill toward West Gate's main house. My heart tightened as the door behind me creaked open.

"Where have you been, Hannalore?" I turned into the assault of Aunt Augusta's icy glare.

"I went for a walk in the meadow," I said, careful not to say too much.

"You were in the meadow the entire time?" She stepped nearer, with a suspicious cock of her head. I held my breath as her eyes shifted over me, taking stock of the tattered condition of my dress.

I weighed my answer, knowing my words would be evaluated and judged for honesty. "Colt came upon me while he was hunting. I was in tears, so we strolled amid the flowers until I regained my composure. I turned my ankle and tumbled into a ditch. We rested for a while until my ankle stopped throbbing. I am fine now, but it took a good deal of time to hobble home on my tender foot."

The ticking of the shelf clock on my nightstand slowed in my ears as Aunt Augusta held my eyes with hers, waiting for me to look away and

reveal my deceit. But in sheer terror of the consequences, I faced her, still and silent like a fawn awaiting the move of a targeted hunter. Would she pull the trigger or let the shot pass? My heart hung in the air between us until finally she twisted her face in disgust.

“A suitable result after your disgraceful outburst in town,” she said evenly. “It was an inexcusable and embarrassing display that will never be repeated. You are too naive to understand the far-reaching effects of such unrestrained sentimentality. However, since your mother and father often indulged in histrionics such as this, I believe you are a victim of your breeding. Therefore, I will spare you the harshness your behavior deserves.” Aunt Augusta paused momentarily, as if overcome by her words. “This reprieve will be afforded to you only once. Do not ever challenge me in this arena in the future, or you will desperately regret it. For now you will remain in your room without supper.”

She turned and went to the door. “Heed my warning, Hannalore; I will not tolerate another outburst like the one I witnessed today. You are no longer a child, and therefore will be held accountable for your actions. When you are judged, so too is this household. And you will not cast a shadow on the name of Augusta Reynolds.”

With that, Aunt Augusta was gone, and I collapsed on the bed in tears.

My empty belly awakened me during the pause between midnight and dawn. I had tossed beneath quilted covers most of the evening with thoughts of Livetta and Marcus colliding with those of Colt and Aunt Augusta. My conscience finally gave way to exhaustion after the clock struck eleven, but now the tugging of unmitigated hunger coaxed me from my bed.

The smooth hardwood floor of the upstairs hallway creaked under my bare feet as I stepped carefully past the muted flow of light from underneath Aunt Augusta’s bedroom door. It was a common sight as the oil lamp in her room often burned throughout the night, one of the hidden chinks in the armor of a woman known for her unwavering fortitude. I long thought she was afraid of the dark, until one stormy night I was awakened by loud thunder and found her doorframe darkened and undisturbed. When I posed the question to Esther Mae, she said, “Chile, Miz ’Gusta gots’ta run de land and de house like a massa man. It be hard on de mind of a missus who is all by herself, alone. It steals her soul of peace and her mind of restful sleep.

’Tain’t fo’ us to question her ways. Where would any of us be if she didn’t have de wherewithal to keep de plantation goin’?”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than Esther Mae’s eyes widened in panic and she rambled nonstop to cover her unguarded comments. “You best not ask so many questions, Miz Hannah. Speakin’ words about Miz ’Gusta will bring me a whippin’ fo’ sure. Now, you go on and pay no mind to yo’ aunt and her peculiar ways.”

I thought it well deserved for Aunt Augusta to wrestle demons in the night. To spare Esther Mae further distress, I kept the thought unspoken and never questioned her again. However, I learned an important lesson. Each of us, including Aunt Augusta, is not always what we appear. To all of Echo Ridge, she was a respected pillar of strength, but out of sight in the secluded rear of the house was an overused lamp she relied on to keep her demons at bay. It gave me satisfaction those windows glowed almost as frequently as her blood ran cold. I remembered words once spoken by my mother: *“Wretchedness should pay a price in the scheme of things.”* I now shared a secret with the river that flowed beneath the cliffs outside Aunt Augusta’s golden windows. Her cruel ways were not without cost.

Leaving the haunted glimmer behind me, I ran my hand along the darkened wall until it found the banister leading me down the stairs. Though the moon was low in the night sky, it shimmered brightly through the downstairs windows, offering me a path across the parlor and into the kitchen. The predawn chill of the hardwood floor bit into my soles until my feet wriggled into warmness. Striking a phosphorous match, I lit the crooked tallow candle at the center of the bucksaw table in the middle of the kitchen. The comforting light of the candle flowed over the table, revealing a small bowl of collard greens and fried bacon left by Granny Morgan, along with a mug of sassafras tea and a healthy slice of cracklin’ bread. No doubt she had fretted about my absence from the dinner table and had hoped I would find her offering, should I seek to fill my emptiness. I was surprised Aunt Augusta had allowed me this reprieve, but I suppose it was just another one of the peculiarities that contradicted her stern demeanor. Hunger had me devouring every last morsel of what Granny had prepared for me. It mattered not that passing hours dulled the texture and taste. To my ravenous soul, it was a feast.

After running my last wedge of bread around the inside of the empty bowl, I savored my finishing bite, then stood and stretched with satisfaction. A movement in the moonlight outside the kitchen door caught my eye. I moved closer to the window and searched the shadows, wondering if Granny had risen early or if it was simply the shuffle of a night critter making its way home before dawn. The woodshed and cookhouse of the side yard were bathed in stillness, when suddenly a face appeared in the window, jolting my heart up through my throat with a gasp. My hands flew to my face, muffling a frightened cry before it left my lips. It was Marcus staring down at me through the window. Within two pounding beats of my heart, I could see that there was desperation in his eyes.

I cracked the door of impropriety again, just wide enough to whisper into the night, “Gracious be, Marcus. An eternity of curse and fury will be cast upon us if anyone sees you here.” I motioned him toward the woodshed across the yard, then slipped out the door and followed him into the night. Stepping behind the blind side of the shed, we talked freely.

“I been waitin’ half the night fo’ a sign o’ life here,” he whispered heatedly. “I didn’t want to stir up the quarters ’cuz some colored been known to offer up their own fo’ Massa’s good favor. I figured sooner or later yo’ black mammy would show up to warm the mornin’ cook fires. Only a mammy’s soft heart could be trusted to fetch you without trouble.”

“Are you completely crazy?” I gasped at his miscalculation. “You would have a better chance slicing your own throat than being seen here!”

“But I spied the welcome lamp burnin’ in the window upstairs. Folks on the run is always told that a lamp in the window means a safe house.”

“A safe house?”

“Safe fo’ a runaway.” He nodded. “A friend of flight where a morsel o’ food or a place to hide can be found fo’ the night. I figured there weren’t no harm in comin’ fo’ help as long as I stayed out o’ sight.”

I trembled at how close we had come to disaster. “Marcus, sometimes a lamp is just a lamp, and I warn you, with the exception of me, you will find no friend here. What possessed you to take such a risk?”

“It’s Livetta. . . . She’s powerful sick. She’s moanin’ with fever,” he said with hushed excitement. “Her hip is nasty swollen and runnin’ yellow. She ain’t talkin’ neither, just lookin’ at me with glass eyes.”

“The germ must have settled in it. We better draw it out as quickly as possible. I once saw Esther Mae lay boiled rags on Elijah’s cut foot when it caught the germ. Come sunup, I will see what medicinal remedies can be garnered from the house without notice. Keep her cool with springwater until then. Go on now, before Twitch’s hounds catch wind of you.”

Marcus nodded and then vanished into the darkness of the upper field. I gathered my nightdress and tiptoed through the dewy yard toward the house. Sensing eyes upon me, I looked up at my bedroom window. My silk dressings twirled peacefully in the breeze of the half-opened window. I breathed a sigh of relief as I stepped back into the seclusion of the kitchen and slipped quietly through the house. *What would happen if Aunt Augusta discovered Marcus and me?* I put the thought out of my mind and took solace in the refuge of my room. I lifted the pitcher of my chamber set and filled my basin. Staring into the looking glass as I bathed, I no longer saw a child quaking beneath the iron fist of a heartless caretaker. Nor did I see a woman of grace and confidence. What, exactly, was I? Choosing a calico cotton dress from my wardrobe, I put it on with the hope of leading all to believe that my morning would be spent picking wild raspberries. After tucking and smoothing my dress into perfect disguise, I sat silently on my bed, waiting for daybreak. Sunrise would find me dressed and ready to throw fate to the winds.

Chapter 5

In keeping with the daily routine of the house, I listened at my door until I heard Aunt Augusta descend the stairs. She always awoke early and sat at the tremendous oak table that formed the center of the chandeliered dining room overlooking the mist-draped river far below, a view much like the one gracing Aunt Augusta's bedroom directly above us. I could not imagine a more glorious greeting than the one offered through those windows as the sun painted the eastern sky pink and orange. The colorful display, coupled with the crackling of wood in the stone fireplace in the wall adjacent to the servants' entrance to the kitchen, made for a warm and alluring room. Even Aunt Augusta mellowed in its ambience as she sipped her tea each morning.

In order not to appear eager, I stepped nonchalantly from the stairs and turned down the hallway streaked with beams of sunlight. I eased into the room and was startled to see Colt at the far end of the table.

He simply nodded at me as he forked the last hearty slice of griddle cake from his plate. I sat across from him and wondered what had brought him to Hillcrest so early. He often took care of various necessities for Aunt Augusta. In fact, as he had grown into manhood, she had come to rely on him for a great many things. And although it was not unusual for them to be found talking privately as she asked questions or gave him instructions, he was not inclined to appear before morning chores were completed. A flutter of anxiety had me fearing that perhaps pangs of guilt and disloyalty had brought him to her table at the crow of the rooster. But I wore my concerned face as discreetly as I did my carefully chosen dress.

"Good morning, Colt. What brings you here with the mourning doves?"

Colt took his last sip of tea and placed the empty cup on the table. "Augusta is leaving for Cumberland Gap tomorrow."

"I have asked Colton to oversee my interests in my absence. I shall be gone no longer than two weeks. I'll expect you to behave in accordance with our discussion last night."

"Of course, Aunt Augusta," I answered while diverting my eyes from Colt.

“If you’ll excuse me, ladies,” Colt said as he rose to his feet. “Some prime hogs broke free of a pen last night. Willy Jack took a passel of field slaves out looking for them. I must check on the status of their search.”

“Why isn’t Twitchell overseeing the slaves?” Aunt Augusta asked impatiently.

Colt glanced at me as he spoke. “Twitch packed up his hounds and set off on a slave hunt before daybreak.” Seeing my face drain of color, he quickly added, “He headed downriver, where some say a band of runaways escaped through the Carolina pass. He’ll track them through the Virginia lowlands for a few days.”

After Colt excused himself, Aunt Augusta and I sat wordlessly until Esther Mae entered through the swinging kitchen door with a steaming tea service balanced in her hands. Moving with well-oiled swiftness, she poured and prepared my morning tea, then stepped away to face Aunt Augusta.

“Anythin’ else, Miz ’Gusta?”

“Yes, Esther Mae. Have Granny Morgan fix a plate of griddle cakes and ham for Hannalore.”

“No, thank you,” I spoke up before Esther Mae could make her retreat. “Tea is all I am suited for this morning.”

“Nonsense, Hannalore. You must be famished. I will not have you weaken yourself and fall ill while I am away. I have important business with my tobacco traders, and I do not wish to be called home before sealing an agreement.”

“Surely you do not believe I will collapse because of one refused griddle cake?”

Aunt Augusta eyed me intently, daring me to sass her again. There was no benefit in agitating her further, and I had more important issues up on the peak, so I surrendered the battle and used it to my advantage.

“Serve Hannalore her breakfast, Esther Mae,” Aunt Augusta said as she rose from her chair. When Esther Mae disappeared into the kitchen, Aunt Augusta circled the table and stood behind me, where I could not see her scowl, though it was present in her voice. “I see you are dressed for outdoor activity this morning.”

“Yes, I shall gather raspberries and enjoy a brisk walk before retiring to my needlework.”

“Indeed, some purposeful activity will be invigorating. I will leave you to your breakfast while I make preparations for my trip.” Then with one last stern glare, she added, “Do not excuse yourself until you have finished your meal.”

Upon being served my breakfast, I immediately wrapped the griddle cakes and smoked ham in my linen napkin. I shoved the bundle into one of the deep pockets of my dress as Esther Mae returned to clear away Aunt Augusta’s teacup. Her brow arched slightly when she saw my emptied plate. However, she said nothing as she gathered the dishes in her arms.

“Esther Mae, do we have any clean rags and ointment I could use to treat a deep flesh wound?”

“Chile, have you done hurt yo’self?” she asked carefully, with a hint of confusion.

I should have thought through my reasoning before asking. The less attention I brought on myself and my whereabouts, the better. I could not risk confiding my secret runaways to Esther Mae, even if I thought she would be akin to helping me. I was well aware that Mud Run had a social dynamic all its own, wherein the slaves interacted, gossiped, and abided by a pecking order often dictated by those who were in highest favor at the main house, be it with Aunt Augusta, Uncle Mooney, Colt, or even wicked Twitch. In fact, his slave driver, Willy Jack, was kept in sturdy brogans with wooden soles, and his cook fire often smelled of pork drippings simply because Twitch favored him. Willy Jack often carried out Twitch’s fierce orders within the ranks of his fellow slaves. Willy Jack was feared as much as, if not more than, Twitch because his eyes could see all that was transpiring beyond the fields after the master retired to the comfort of his hearth. So rather than chance any suspicious notions being set loose and whispered through Mud Run, I placated Esther Mae with the quickest fib I could fabricate.

“No, it’s nothing, really. I saw a helpless fawn yesterday. The poor thing was clawed across the haunches by a bear or mountain lion. It was bleeding quite badly and not likely to survive. If I come across it while berry picking, perhaps some comfort can be offered by sealing its wound.”

Esther Mae chuckled. “Miz Hannah, you know yo’ auntie won’t never let you waste good liniment on some half-dead animal in de woods. Now, I can’t touch de medicine closet without permission, but if yo’ heart is set on

it, then I'll have my boy, Elijah, fetch me some herb poultice from the cabin. It helps some when Massa's whip lays open de skin."

"Oh, Esther Mae," I said, reminded of her husband's suffering the previous day. "I am so sorry about what happened to Winston in town."

"Don't say nothin' more, chile," she said with an agitated wave of her arms. "Don't want no more brought down upon us."

I hushed in shame and followed Esther Mae through the kitchen and into the side yard, where hours earlier I had promised Marcus I would come to the peak after breakfast. I waited outside the gate of the fence that sectioned the yard. Esther Mae trotted across the front lawn and down the knoll into Mud Run. I watched as she waved Elijah into their cabin to fetch the poultice, and that's when I noticed Winston gingerly running a brush over the back of a mare alongside the stables. Our eyes locked. To my surprise, he did not turn away. Stiff and sore, he nodded politely and then turned his attention back to the horse.

Winston was a gentle soul and the most amiable of any slave I had ever encountered. Because he was our carriage driver, I found myself in his company almost as much as in Granny Morgan's and Esther Mae's. Fatima and Tessie also worked in the house, although their duties usually kept them in the sewing room. However, they rarely spoke when I joined them during my afternoon needlework. Winston, on the other hand, was always quick to give me a wink and a grin, as if we shared some grand secret joke between us. I could never quite figure it out, but it was oddly comforting and never inappropriate or forthright. Unlike the indelicate winks directed my way by Twitch when no one else was aware.

"Miz Hannah, my mama says to fetch this to you," Elijah said, handing me a preserve jar half- filled with a brown salve. "Says you should bring back what you don't use so she can send it with my daddy when he leaves with Miz 'Gusta tomorr'y."

I waved down to Esther Mae, who stood, arms folded, on her doorstep. "Tell your mama I will return it this afternoon."

"Yas'sum." He grinned with a pleasant smile as quick as his father's. As he scampered off, I went to the shed for a berry tin and headed up the mountain.

I could barely contain my feet in an unobtrusive march until I reached the meadow, where I broke free into a full-out run. Unrestrained breaths were

soon bursting from my bosom as I pushed upward to the peak without so much as a moment's rest. I slowed my pace when I reached the shadowed coolness of the pine hollow. If not for the exuberant trill of a scarlet tanager hidden somewhere in the treetops, it would have been easy to believe that there wasn't another heart beating within a hundred miles. A strange swell of anticipation filled me as I neared the rocky ridge that held my secret.

Suddenly, the unmistakable snap of footsteps on twigs peppered through the trees behind me. I stopped in my tracks, barely a stone's throw from the cave entrance, unsure of whether to run or face the threat head-on. Fear pounded in my chest as I frantically scanned the trees around me. The crunch of heavy boots sent me scampering like a frightened squirrel in another direction, in the hope of misdirecting my pursuer away from Marcus and Livetta. Kicking up pine needles and mossy cakes of dirt, I fled deeper into the hollow; however, the footsteps came with me and closed the gap between us.

"Hannah! Where are you going?"

I looked over my shoulder and saw Colt trotting along the wooded path. I stopped and dropped to my knees, relieved but confused. He hurried past me toward the cave, with a large sack over his shoulder and a small wooden box in the crook of his arm.

"Land sakes, Colt, you frightened me to death."

"Didn't you hear me call out to you? I saw you enter the path in the meadow. What are you doing up here?"

"Marcus came down the mountain last night. Livetta is sick."

"I know," he said, nudging through the gap in the rocks. "I was here before dawn."

Taken aback by the thought of Colt initiating such action, I helped him push his hefty sack through the hole and followed him in. Entering the cave on my hands and knees, I looked up and found myself surrounded by a sea of black faces. From my crouched position, I watched as they parted for Colt to walk toward the rear of the cave. There, Livetta shivered in Marcus's arms as he stroked her forehead with a wet rag.

The group turned their guarded eyes back to me. There were seven new runaways in all, including a stern boy who looked to be a few years younger than I, and a proud, glaring woman with a motherly arm around his shoulders. Fidgeting in the shadows to my left was a sad and weary mulatto

woman with two quadroons clinging to her waist, and a robust, gray-haired mammy with her stocky son propping her up at the elbow. Thoughts of the previous day played out in my mind, when unseen companions had scattered away through the tall grass, leaving Marcus and Livetta to face their fate alone. I had assumed they were long gone, but obviously they had stayed near enough to return once it was deemed safe. Now, in an air of bitter scrutiny, not one among them moved to assist me as I hoisted myself onto my feet.

“Hannah, come and give me a hand.”

I straightened my disheveled dress, and as I passed through the united front, I handed my small bundle of griddle cakes to the young mother. The older of her two children, a girl, pulled at her mother’s blouse with desperate hunger shaking her small, frail body.

“Lillabelle,” the woman said gently. “We is all like kin now, together like this. So we gots’ta give up some to feed t’others.”

With that, the attention on me dissipated into a tangle of hands reaching out to the woman who shared the modest meal equally among them.

Marcus looked over at me when I knelt down between him and Colt at Livetta’s side. Her dark skin was taut and ashen. Her marble eyes stared blankly, focused on nothing. It was clear the germ had taken hold of her. The gentleness of Marcus’s brotherly comfort wobbled my heart. I could barely take my eyes from his tender intent, until Colt opened the wooden box tucked under his arm. He ran his fingers across the sleek, shiny knives glimmering in the sunbeams that pierced down through the rocky ceiling.

“Gracious be, Colt. What are you doing?”

“I boiled them at the house. I must open her wound and remove the pellet.”

Marcus’s face clouded over as Colt’s words sank in. “You mean you is fixin’ to cut Livetta open?”

“I will make a small incision to remove the ball and flush the wound.”

“Can’t let you do that,” Marcus said. “Jes’ fetch some powerful medicine from the big house to rid Livetta of the fever. Don’t want no cuttin’ and bleedin’.”

Sensing more fear in Marcus’s resistance than I did blatant refusal, I offered what encouragement I could. “Colt knows what he’s doing, Marcus.

He spent nearly six months in Richmond as an apprentice with Dr. Winford LaValle, one of Virginia's finest."

I didn't mention that Uncle Mooney had little respect for Colt's compassion and desire to help others. He had agreed to the apprenticeship solely because he felt whatever medicinal training Colt brought back to West Gate could be put to use in tending to lame horses and containing any disease that threatened the hog population. Beyond that, it was not an endeavor he encouraged his son to pursue. Colt had been quite impassioned by it, but upon his return, at his father's insistence, the small box of medical utensils and elixirs was regretfully tucked away. Uncle Mooney wanted all notions beyond the business of West Gate to be cast from Colt's mind. Now and again, though, an urgent situation would arise that brought Colt's hidden talents to the surface, and this was indeed one of those occasions.

Marcus measured us with uncertainty. He looked down at his suffering sister, then back again at our earnest faces. Suddenly, the proud, angry woman stepped from the group and challenged Marcus.

"Don't you let no white slaver lay a knife to that chile's black skin. They would sooner cut her heart out and fed it to the sows 'fore they use their healin' medicine on one of us. Don't trust nothin' a slaver says or promises. We all got the strap marks to know I speak the truth."

"Hush up, Raizy. You got no say in this."

"The hell you say, fool. We didn't come this far so you can sacryfice the lot of us to save yo' kin. You is the one who said from the get- go that if any of us gets sick or can't keep pace, then they gots'ta be left behind for the good of the group. They is your words, outright."

"The group is not in danger," Marcus growled.

"There's always danger when you trust a milky-white soul from the big house. You may as well put our heads on the choppin' block."

Frustrated with the standoff, Colt went for the large sack he had been carrying when first I saw him in the woods. He walked over and shoved it into the hands of the distrusting woman.

"Would I bring you all these provisions if I intended harm? There is enough to fill your bellies and see you on your way."

They gathered around the sack and pulled out loaves of cracked bread, salted pork, apple butter, and a hefty bag of cornmeal. The woman called Raizy offered no apologies or grateful acknowledgments, but backed away

from her protest and huddled with the circle to partake in the food. The magnitude of their situation suddenly hit me. For the first time since our paths crossed, I was frightened—not by them, but by the desperation and determination that drove them north, as well as the hateful vengeance of those equally pledged to keep them in their place and the ways of the South intact.

Colt expressed urgency in Livetta's treatment, although his facade remained calm. "We must rid her of the infection before it takes a death hold on her. I know it's a difficult decision, but these things can move swiftly, and waiting may take it out of our hands."

Marcus finally conceded. "Then let's not waste no more breath talkin' 'bout it."

Colt nodded and removed his scalpel from the box. "I will open the wound just enough to flush it clean. Then I will seal it with a hot blade."

Marcus winced in empathy. "We gonna need to hold her down."

Raizy and the stocky young man stepped forward from the group and positioned themselves opposite each other, over Livetta's limp knees. Joining in the silent cooperation, I shimmied in next to Livetta and carefully pulled apart the stained bullet hole in her dress to expose the inflamed wound. As Marcus leaned down across his sister's upper body to anchor her shoulders and arms, Colt sank his knife into her hip. Livetta jolted from her disoriented stupor with a whooping cry. I instinctively grabbed her fingers when she clawed at the ground beneath her brother's weight. She clung to my hand and pulled me near. I glanced down toward her hip, where blood and fluid oozed like brown honey. Colt's thumb and forefinger disappeared into the open wound and resurfaced with a dark, round gun pellet.

"Got it!" Colt looked up at me with great relief and a hint of pride in his gleaming eyes. "Pass me the kettle with the boiled water," he called out to the mesmerized group behind us. The young mother heeded his words and ran for the small kettle of water that sat near the smoldering fire. Colt must have wisely ordered it boiled earlier, because as I reached across to take it from her eager grasp, it was tepid and soothing to the touch.

"Hannah, I am going to pull her wound open while you pour a steady stream to flush it clean."

With Marcus and the two other runaways still holding Livetta down, I did as Colt instructed. Most of the festering washed away with the first rush of

water, and before the kettle emptied, the wound appeared clear and ready to be sealed. I shifted around Marcus and placed a moist rag on Livetta's forehead.

"You are very brave, Livie. We're almost done." Her face eased in response to my words.

"Our mama and sister used to call her Livie," Marcus said as he loosened his grip. "Haven't heard the name spoken fo' the better part of six years."

Colt dipped the knife blade into the unused water left in the kettle and gave it a vigorous swirl. He examined the cleansed metal, then walked to the fire and held it out in the flame.

"I must seal the wound closed as protection from any other infectious germ. Since I don't have all the medical equipment needed, I must burn the flesh over it."

Before we had the chance to digest the horror of what he was about to do, Colt moved from the fire, the hot orange glow of his blade aimed down at the unsuspecting girl's exposed hip. We all grabbed what we could of Livie as Colt pressed the hot blade across the wound, instantly sending the sizzle and smell of burnt flesh throughout the cave. He was as quick and humane as his trembling hands allowed, but Livie exploded with an agonizing cry. Colt tossed the knife back into the wooden box and helped hold down Livie's convulsing body.

"It's done, Livie. It's all done," I whispered over and over in her ear as her cries peaked, then trailed off as she fainted in painful surrender.

Livie did not move for more than an hour, and was still unconscious when Colt and I decided it was best to head back to Hillcrest before Aunt Augusta became suspicious of our absence. As we exited the cave, I heard Raizy's voice rise.

"You can't trust 'em. They take pleasure in our sufferin' and have done nothin' but torture this poor chile. Now she's branded like a prize steer. This girl gots'ta be sacryficed for the good of the group. That's jes' the way of it."

Chapter 6

“She dead, Miz Hannah,” Lillabelle wailed as I entered the cave. “She dead! She dead!”

The bottom dropped out of my heart as the young quadroon clung to my legs, shackling me from running to the group huddled, in the late-morning gleam of the cave, around the bed of needles opposite me. I had waited impatiently for Aunt Augusta to set off on her trip to Cumberland Gap, so I could come and go as I pleased. As I waved Aunt Augusta good-bye, I had wondered why Colt had not come to bid her farewell. I had no way of knowing that I would find him here with the runaways.

Lillabelle pulled me toward the circle of slaves. I stumbled in disbelief. Our efforts to save Livie had failed, and by the look of the shoving match between Colt and Marcus, we were being held accountable. Colt shook his head and waved his hands at Marcus.

“It was a foolish mistake,” he said in an irritated voice. “And far too dangerous . . .” He paused when he saw me rushing toward him. “Hannah?”

I cried out, “Why didn’t you tell me? Maybe I could have done something!” Raizy jumped out of my way as I threw myself into the inner circle and fell into the dust at Colt and Marcus’s feet. “Why didn’t you tell me she died?”

Marcus rolled his eyes with exasperation. “Not you too. You is as bad as Lillabelle, carrying on ’bout an ol’ jackrabbit like it’s a member of the family.”

“What?”

He held out his hand and let the slaughtered rabbit he’d wrangled swing by its ears back and forth in front of my confused face. “I keep tellin’ this fool that after three days of comin’ up here in the woods under the guise of huntin’, he best be takin’ home a kill, or his daddy is gonna get to wonderin’.”

I swung around in a fit of tears and saw Livie propped on one arm, staring at me with a tired eyebrow raised in amusement. “I never knowed white folks was such unusual critters,” she mumbled as she ruffled some

burlap Colt had brought to pillow her head. “Best be tellin’ your beau to take that there rabbit from Marcus, ’cuz we all seen down in the meadow he ain’t got no knack fo’ shootin.” She smiled to herself as she lay her head down and closed her eyes.

“Lillabelle said she was dead.” I sniffled as Colt helped me to my feet.

“Oh, that spirited chile is talkin’ ’bout the rabbit,” Marcus said, shoving the kill against Colt’s chest. “I trapped and strangled it this morning. Now take it so no one thinks you is doin’ somethin’ more than huntin’ up in these hills.”

“I still say it was a damn foolish thing to do.” Colt reluctantly took the limp rabbit in hand. “If anybody had seen you, this hare would not have been the only kill of the day.”

In my relief at seeing Livie alive and with regained strength and clarity of mind, I failed to take notice of Colt’s frustration.

“I need a word with you outside, Hannah,” he said curtly as he pressed an unusually gruff hand against the small of my back and directed me into the pines outside the hideaway.

“Keep walking,” he said without giving clue as to the cause of his thinly veiled anger. “We’ll speak once we are out of earshot of the others.”

We continued through a break in the pines and up over the knoll leading to the eastern slope of the ridge overlooking the Red Hawk River. It was a pristine sight, but I knew we were not there to take in the view. I thought perhaps a compliment would soften his mood.

“I am so proud of your doctoring skills. You saved Livie’s life. The feeling must bring you great satisfaction.”

“The only feeling I have right now is sheer terror, and you should feel the same, Hannah. This situation is out of control. You are far too emotionally immersed with these people. We need to send them on their way before it’s too late.”

“Livie will not survive a perilous trip in her condition.”

“She may not survive staying here either,” he said. “My point is you have become too attached. You must distance yourself, because sentimental notions have no place in what we are doing.”

“You probably expect me to agree with you, Colt, but I can’t help thinking maybe sentimental notions have *everything* to do with it. My emotions are mine and mine alone. And they are not controlled by you or

Aunt Augusta or anybody else, for that matter. Maybe it's time I face my emotions head-on and figure them out for myself."

"Bloody hell!" Colt growled.

"How dare you . . . ?"

"No, not you," he said, pointing down across the river. "Look!"

Just beyond the southern bend of the river, where the flatland stretched clear of the wooded landscape, a cloud of dust barreled its way along the red dirt road toward the river crossing on the distant banks of Echo Ridge.

"Have mercy! Is that Twitch heading back to West Gate so soon?"

It was a question that needed no answer. Even from our perch two miles above, I recognized the creaky, enclosed buckboard rattling along behind his two hard-driven palominos. And though we were too far away to see anything more than his disagreeable frame hunched over the reins, I felt his snarl right down to my bones.

"Come, we must put the fire out," Colt said, as he grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the cave.

"Don't worry, Colt. Any billows rising up from the cave can't be seen in town. You told me that yourself. All the smoke gets funneled through the rock formations in the other direction."

Stumbling toward the cave entrance, Colt released me so he could bend and catch his breath. After a few deep breaths, he straightened up and regained his composure with a simple shift of his shoulders.

"A line of smoke from the cave might not be seen from town, but I am certain it will catch the eye of anyone approaching the ridge from the east or north."

"Even if Twitch sees it," I stammered, reassuring myself aloud, "he may pay it no mind. Someone stoking a fire in the woods is as natural as rain falling from a passing cloud."

"We can't take the chance, Hannah."

The pounding of my heart told me he was right. When we plunged back through the rocky wall, our concern and anxiety were reflected back at us from shadowed faces. Most of the group sat about nibbling morsels from the food rations Colt had supplied them. The pouches slung over their shoulders were weighted with enough cornmeal for a week's worth of ashcakes. The sight made me grateful they would not be sent away empty-handed, and that their unexpected stop in Echo Ridge would somehow

better their chance of finding their way north. But once my eyes settled on Livie passed out in the corner, any self-righteous thoughts I had about having done these people any favor was washed away by a wave of remorse. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Colt approach Marcus.

“It’s time for you to leave,” he ordered. Marcus stood nose to nose with Colt and offered what amounted to a restrained bark of protest.

“Livetta can’t be moved yet. She be dead ’fore we get to the next pass.”

“It is too dangerous to stay,” Colt said, not backing down. “It’s only a matter of time before a group this size is discovered here. I insist you move on.”

“In a few days . . . when Livetta is stronger.”

Colt leaned into Marcus’s puffed chest. “If you don’t leave at nightfall, you could be hanging from a tree by midday tomorrow.”

A scuffle of arms and legs broke out between them until Raizy and her son pulled the two apart. Both huffed and snorted at each other with fiery eyes, but neither raised a fist to continue the battle. Marcus shook Raizy off his arm and ran his hands up over his tight curls, as if raking through his thoughts with his fingers.

“Marcus,” Raizy pleaded. “You said if someone can’t go on, they gots’ta stay behind. That goes for yo’ sister, same as the rest of us.”

“I will not leave Livetta,” he shot back. “Go on without us.”

“We don’t know the way,” the oldest of the group countered. “Ain’t right to bring us this far and then send us on blind.”

“You jes’ follow the drinking gourd in the night sky. You know that, old woman. Or watch for the moss growin’ thick on the north side of the trees.”

“But the drinking gourd ain’t gonna show us where the safe passes are through the mountains or where the favorin’ light burns for us. Boy, you gots’ta lead the way, or we is doomed to die.”

Marcus detached from the pressure by crouching beside Livie. She was awake now, and from the jumpiness in her eyes, it was clear she heard most of what was said.

“You ain’t leavin’ me, is you, Marcus?” She labored to a sitting position, until the pain leveled her onto her back. He tugged the blanket and smoothed it around her trembling body as she pleaded, “I’ll be fine, Raizy. Ya’ll see.”

“No, Livetta,” Marcus said, firmly. “You spilled a lot o’ blood, so you is mighty weak. Pushing on will kill you fo’ sure.”

On my knees next to Marcus, I was mesmerized by the raw devotion between brother and sister. I never thought much about what transpired in the cabins of Mud Run, but the general opinion of my social peers was that familial bonds and intimate caring was not in the nature or of particular value to the slave population. But as witness to their pain, I could not stand by and leave them to their suffering.

“I will care for her,” popped from me like an unexpected hiccup. Their heads turned to me in stunned silence. Words came quickly and without contemplation. “You can make safe passage for the others while I look after Livie. Then you can come back for her when you are able.”

“Hannah, you are not . . .” Colt began, until my determined glare made him swallow his thought.

“It makes perfect sense,” I continued, before any more protests could be voiced. “One person is easier to hide than nine. Therefore, once you go, she will be out of danger.”

“Please don’t leave me with her, Marcus,” Livie wailed. Marcus brooded with careful consideration, and I suspected he saw sense in my idea.

“Sounds right smart to me,” Raizy chimed in from behind. “At least the chile has a chance if her legs is given time to grow strong enough to carry her feet north. You said you would turn south again to bring mo’ to freedom once the path is put to memory in yo’ head.”

Livie shook her head and braced for what she read in her brother’s distraught eyes. He looked at me with an intensity that hummed throughout my body. He turned the palm of one of his hands up in front of me. “Do you swear at the feet of sweet Jesus that you will look after her?”

“Of course,” I said, hoping to mask the surprise that stiffened me from head to toe. I had never encountered a slave, fugitive or otherwise, who dared to speak so boldly, much less demand something of me. He seemed to want me to touch his upright hand, but I could never. . . .

“*Promise me,*” he said louder as he grabbed one of my hands and squeezed it tight in his upright palm. As we touched, his raw emotion pierced through his powerful hand into mine and penetrated my defenses.

“Do you promise to see to it that Livetta is safe and has what she needs until I come back to fetch her?”

My breast heaved with an explosion of fear. My hand trembled in his, and try as I might, I could not calm the panic brought on by this breach of conduct. Yet my impulse was not to pull away. “Yes,” I finally breathed as my throat unclenched.

He reached out with his free hand, this time more gently, and took my other hand and raised it to match the hands we still clasped. We tightened our grip by allowing our fingers to entwine. I could barely breathe as the presence of the others seemed to fall away around me. Marcus’s eyes were now soft and reverent.

“This is a promise bridge,” he said, squeezing my hands tightly to emphasize the connection. “And it bridges a promise from your heart to mine. It can’t never be broken, because it is inside you now. It stays there forever and passes on to all that comes from you, and is carried by your spirit when it rises to heaven. The promise is a part of you now, understand?”

His words held on to my heart as firmly as his hands folded with mine. The emotion created by the bridge between us overwhelmed me. No man had ever been so forthright in my presence, not even Colt, who hid his occasional flirtation behind a playful tickle or peck on the cheek. Far from childhood at nearly twenty years old, I was still handled like a delicate rose by all who engaged me. My head dizzied in a bewildering swirl of conflict and commitment as I allowed this man to hold me in his grasp for an inappropriate period of time. *This black man. A slave.* It was an astounding transgression that I could not right with sense or reason. Yet it also released something untapped within that filled me with intrigue and amazement. Bolstered by an awakening I could not yet fully understand, I held my fear at bay and returned the clasp of his hand as intently as it was given, and whispered, “Yes, I promise, Marcus. I promise with heart and soul.”

Chapter 7

*W*ith a nod of approval, Marcus let go of my hands and reached for Livie, who was sniffling softly against the sleeve of her dress. I remained propped on my knees, unaware of my limp hands dangling in the air until I looked up into Colt's perplexed face. He stared at me, thinking thoughts that were impossible to read. My head lowered along with my hands; I did not want to be judged in his eyes.

"I hear dogs yelpin'," Lillabelle said, dragging a bucket through the cave entrance.

Her mother ran to her and pulled her to her feet. "What you doin' out there, chile? You gonna be seen!"

"I went fetchin' water from the stream fo' Livetta. Don't be angry, Mama, 'cuz I was 'specially quiet in case any paddy rollers was lookin' about."

"Don't you ever go off on your own again, Lillabelle." Marcus came across the cave to lift her chin so she could see the alarm in his face. "Now, tell me about the dogs."

"I heared 'em comin' from down yonder where they gunned Livetta."

Colt grabbed my hand and stepped to Marcus. "We'll go down the mountain to intercept any danger heading this way. If we can't stop it, I will squeeze off one shot of my rifle to give you time to scatter. If there is no gun blast, then you are safe for now. But heed my warning and be on your way with the twitter of the first night cricket, so your tracks are cold and faded by morning."

I eased the tension between them when I added, "I will be back tomorrow with more provisions for Livie."

With that, we parted from our band of runaways. As Colt and I cut a hasty path back through the pine hollow, I looked over my shoulder and saw Marcus staring from the cave entrance. I am sure I saw him nod just before Colt jerked my elbow to keep my attention moving in his direction. I kept stride with Colt around the still waters of Emerald Cove to the steep path descending the mountainside. Near the meadow, I heard the first low

bellow of the hounds, just as Lillabelle had said. No effort was wasted on words as we scampered down from the peak. Using our hands like tobacco machetes, we slapped our way through the underbrush as Twitch and his dogs pounced over the far knoll of the meadow, followed by his slave driver, Willy Jack.

I immediately took Colt's hand to slow his pace. Under normal circumstances, the mere sight of Twitch riled Colt's defenses, and I did not want Twitch to sense any added uneasiness. Not much got by Twitch's demon eye. He had a way of observing and deciphering situations that peeled away layers until the heart of the matter was revealed and vulnerable. I suppose that was what made him good at what he did, but it was unnerving to those under his scrutiny. By the time our paths met in the tall grass of the meadow, his hounds were barking and running in circles around us.

"Gracious be, Twitch. Calm these crazy animals," I said, feigning a casual lilt.

Twitch gave the one nearest me a boot in the haunches that sent it yelping back over the hill, with three others giving chase. Willy Jack waited about twenty paces away, knowing it was not his place to join the group.

"When did you ride in?" Colt asked without masking his disdain. "I thought you would be gone a week or more."

Twitch fixed his good eye on him as he tongued a wad of tobacco inside his bulging cheek, before spewing a dark stream down toward Colt's boots. "Then you thought wrong, Purebred. Anyway, when I come and go ain't none o' your damn business."

"If you are fresh off the road," I jumped in, hoping to tame Twitch's foul mood, "what brings you up on the mountain? Ol' Uncle Mooney better not be working you too hard. A man's got the right to put up his feet and relax after a long journey."

"Ain't seen the ol' man, but I spied a line o' smoke up on the peak when I came across the flatlands. Gonna have me a look around."

"Well, if you are curious about the smoke, it was just Colt and me. We had a fire going earlier."

"That's right," Colt said. "I decided to do a little hunting."

"And with Aunt Augusta gone, Colt let me tag along."

Twitch squeezed his dead eye closed and studied us. Then he tugged at the limp rabbit hanging on Colt's belt.

"You kill that?"

Colt was taken off guard because he had apparently forgotten about the rabbit Marcus had given him in the cave. He yanked the animal back from Twitch. "Let's just say it's none of *your* damn business," Colt said, posturing himself for trouble.

Twitch let out a whoop of craggy laughter. "You think I am stupid or somethin'? I know what the two of you are up to."

My heart sank like a rock in my chest. Were we that transparent? Or was it simply that his instincts were as keen as he often boasted? Visions of bloodthirsty hounds tearing at dark, defenseless flesh swirled in my mind. From the corner of my eye, I saw the subtle movement of Colt's finger sliding in position over the trigger of the rifle tucked in the crook of his arm. But would a warning shot give them enough time?

"You think I can't see the dirt on the front o' your dress where you was on your knees?" Twitch grinned with rotted teeth. "You may have snuck off into the trees, but it wasn't to do no huntin'." Twitch cackled back over his shoulder toward Willy Jack. "There ain't even no buck-shot in that mangy hare."

Colt raised his fist to deliver a blow to the filthy-mouthed snake, but I caught him by the arm. I knew that once I had the chance to digest Twitch's insinuations, I would be as fiery as an angry bull, but for now I figured it was best he believed his titillating fantasy rather than have him look to uncover some other reason for Colt and me to be on the peak.

Seeing Colt's restrained anger, Twitch looked squarely at him. "Guess I don't need to waste time sniffin' the smoke of another man's fire. Maybe Hannah will hunt with me next time. I been known to spark a fire or two myself." Then, winking his dead eye in my direction, he added, "The torch down in my belly burns a might hotter than straight-laced Colt's."

With one forceful yank, Colt freed his arm from my grasp and clamped his hand across Twitch's throat. Twitch quickly countered by swiping a knife from the leather pouch tied on his belt. The sleeve on Colt's outstretched arm creased under the pressure of Twitch's blade.

"Take your hand off me, Purebred, or it will be the last thing you use it for."

The veins bulging in Colt's neck pulsated as deep shades of red migrated across his face. I slipped a gentle hand under his arm.

"Don't let him bait you, Colt."

Finally, he forced his uncooperative hand to let go. Colt echoed Twitch's gasp as the fierce stalemate ended with each taking a guarded step back. Twitch holstered his knife, then crinkled his face into a devilish smirk. Satisfied he had won the standoff, he turned and headed back down the meadow toward West Gate. And although the threat was only temporarily defused, I breathed a little easier with each step he took in the opposite direction.

Once back in the quiet retreat of my bedchamber, I was awash with thoughts and emotions. My worries were buffered by the fact that Aunt Augusta was on leave from the house, allowing me sufficient privacy to sort out my thoughts. *Am I crazy thinking I can keep Livie safe? Where will Marcus and the others go from here? When will he return? Is that his touch still lingering on my fingertips?* So much had happened, I could barely digest it all. To calm my uneasiness, I busied myself with needlework in the sewing room. By the time Esther Mae tapped on the door, it was time for supper. When Aunt Augusta was away, it was Colt's habit to have dinner with me; however, I was not surprised to find myself alone at the dining table. Although a degree of uneasiness came with his absence, I believed it was for the best. I was not in the mood for polite chatter with someone whose stubborn insistence at driving the runaways onward could very well put them on the path of inevitable capture.

Upon scooping the last few morsels of snap beans and pearl onions from my plate, I told Esther Mae I would take my tea on the front porch. I settled on the rocker and creaked in rhythm to the evening chorus accompanying the sun as it lowered in the sky before me. Uncle Mooney's blacksmith, silent James, led a team of workhorses to the stables. James was hired out to Hillcrest to fulfill Winston's duties when Aunt Augusta's business took her away for more than a day or two. James stood tallest of the West Gate slaves, with broad, powerful shoulders and muscled arms chiseled from days spent fulfilling blacksmith duties between the two plantations. His shirt was stripped of both sleeves, with the frayed edges waving surrender to the girth of his arm. He rarely spoke, even to the other slaves, and lived by himself in the loft of the barn used as a forge and farrier shop.

Colt told me James was won in a poker game while Uncle Mooney conducted business down in Mississippi. I overheard Granny Morgan tell Esther Mae that James had a wife and baby sold south before he came to West Gate, which left him with a defiant streak. I did not know if the quarter gossip was true, but it would explain why his master used him to pay off a gambling debt to Uncle Mooney. James was tied to a wagon and returned to West Gate, where he spent his first few weeks in leg and neck shackles secured in the back lot, while Twitch made it known to all that he would break this powerful new buck same as the rest. The last two days of the process, he corralled the slaves of both properties to bear witness to the whippings and watch as the raw wounds were washed in brine until he succumbed. From that point on, James gave in to his new master with detached obedience.

Watching James now, I thought again about the heart-wrenching separation taking place between Marcus and Livie. The flutter in my heart forced my eyes toward Mud Run. The huddled cabins looked no different than they did any other day, except the life and activity there appeared more vivid to me. *What do they talk about inside those cabins? Does James think of his wife and child when he is in the barn, alone with his thoughts? Was Esther Mae missing Winston when she walked down over the knoll with her head drooped to one side?* For me, the shuffle of the slaves from field to cabin simply marked the time of day. And though I often heard the mournful songs that accompanied their migration, I never noticed until now their hunched shoulders and weary faces reflecting the toil of their day.

Shaken by a sudden chill, I crossed my arms tightly against my chest. A thick haze pushed what was left of the setting sun from view. There was no orange glow to punctuate the end of the day, but rather a birdless gray sky brewing dark with storm clouds. A steady wind picked up from the southwest. Loose strands of hair blew across my face and signaled me to make my retreat. I closed the door against the unsettled dust. If the clouds drew near enough to roll over the mountain, the night ahead would be a fury.

A sudden crash of thunder sprang me upright in my bed as walls and windows shook around me. Lightning flashed across my room with nary a pause in between. I pulled my bed jacket snug around my shoulders and went to the north window. Rain pelted loudly against the pane, and the trees

of Mud Run were throwing fits against the wind. I worried for Marcus and the other runaways. I knew they would not delay their trek through the mountains, but battling a fierce, drenching gale in the thickness of night might be equally as treacherous as Twitch cornering them with his hounds. *Is the call of the North so strong it will coax them blindly into the belly of the storm? Or is it the misery from which they flee driving them into hell, seeking a better fate?*

A jagged bolt of lightning sliced through the ominous blackness above the peak. My thoughts went to Livie alone in Copperhead Cave. Each thunderous crash poked a fretful jab at my conscience until I was terrified for her. I opened my hand and touched the palm where Marcus had wrapped his fingers while I vowed to take care of Livie. He was right. I could feel the promise that bridged us. So I hastily put on the dress I had worn earlier and bundled together two quilts, a cotton dress, and fresh undergarments all wrapped in a wool blanket. Downstairs, I was careful not to rouse Granny Morgan, who slept in a room adjacent to the root cellar. I lit the oil lamp on the table, threw a cloth rag over it to shield it from the rain, and set off on a perilous journey up the heaving mountain.

The veil of night was torn away by bursts of white lightning. I shouldered the storm as best I could while holding the lamp and bundle close to my breast so they would not fall victim to the driving rain. Neither courage nor sense of duty kept my feet moving forward. It was the thought of someone like me, out there alone and afraid, that coaxed me from my warm bed. Trudging my way up to the peak, I ducked under my cloak with each explosion of thunder, convinced the sky was crashing down upon my lowered head. I found relief from the downpour in the tall pines of the hollow, although the echo chamber within the woods sent me running for the cave.

At first, the screams were barely distinguishable from the crashing heavens, but as I neared the cave, Livie’s terrified cries pierced through the storm. I pushed through the entrance, balancing my wares. I had forgotten Colt had suffocated the fire earlier, so the soft glow of my lamp barely smudged the pitch-blackness. The lightning that danced outside the opening high above reflected eerily from wall to wall, and I saw a quick flash of Livie at the far end of the cave.

“Livie, it’s me, Hannah,” I called. “Don’t be frightened.”

After stumbling across her makeshift bed, I found Livie where she had crawled into a corner. She was huddled behind a rock, with her eyes fixed upward where the lightning penetrated her shelter. An uncontainable wail rose from her with each jolt of thunder that shook through the cave. I reached out to touch her shoulder, but it only heightened her cries.

“I shall light a fire,” I yelled. “The storm won’t seem so bad then.”

Strewn across the pit was a modest array of partially burned wood. I pushed the pieces up against each other as I had observed Marcus do, and found a neat pile of kindling he had wisely left for our use. I was grateful for his forethought, because it would have been impossible to find a dry stick of wood outside the protection of the cave. I arranged the sticks between the logs, and then touched some pine needles with the flaming wick of my lamp. The needles torched warmly, igniting the twigs until finally the logs were ablaze. The cave filled with a crackling orange glow as the fire took hold.

“Much better,” I said as I snuffed the flame of my lamp and set it aside. “No sense wasting wick and oil. I shall leave the lamp for you to use at another time.”

Thankfully, the storm was less magnified in the firelit cave. Livie struggled to uncurl and sit upright. I offered her a hand, but her eyes sharpened with determination and disregard of my gesture. Holding her stiff right leg, she groaned each time she changed her position.

“This is silly,” I said, hoisting her under the arm so she could shift her weight with less pain. “Just let me help you.”

After we moved together to the evergreen bed, Livie collapsed onto the blanket. The night had taken its toll on her, so she lay there, watching me through drained eyes. The thunder that barreled over the mountain was now held at bay. We were no longer spooked, as the lightning flashes blended into the licks of flame that danced in front of us. I unbundled the quilts and spread one over Livie, then arranged the dampened blanket and clothes near the fire. My eyes hung heavy with exhaustion as I settled back into the pines near Livie. Her dozing face breathed out anxious release. I pulled my quilt up under my chin and began a slow surrender into sleep. Beneath the drooping lid of my eye, I saw Livie stir awake and peek sideways at me. With the rumble of the storm receding into the distance, Livie and I drifted off in the comfort of each other’s presence.

Chapter 8

I was coaxed awake by the tap of an early rising woodpecker deep in the hollow beyond the cave walls. My damp clothes invited the morning chill to cling to me. Wrapping a quilt around my shoulders, I went to the fire and rolled another log into the pit, as I had done twice during the night. Within minutes, the flames grew up around it and warmed me considerably. Livie shifted to one side, and I realized she had been watching me.

“The fire is quite soothing, don’t you think?” I waited for an answer, but she lay there with her arm folded up under her head. “With all the sticks and logs your brother gathered, we can keep this flame burning for a week or more.”

Still, no answer.

“I never knew anyone named Livetta. It’s a pretty name. Do you mind if I call you Livie? It just seems natural to me.”

The silence had me feeling a bit foolish, so I sorted through the small bag of provisions Marcus left for Livie. There was a crumbled piece of corn bread wrapped in parchment that looked the most edible of the lot. I took it to Livie and sat down beside her.

“Are you hungry?”

She took it without hesitation and shoved it in her mouth, using her cupped hand to catch the crumbs. Her silence was purposeful; I was well aware that she could talk. She simply refused to talk to *me*. Thinking back, I realized the few words I had heard her speak were all directed to Marcus.

“My uncle has a slave named James who does not speak. He mostly grunts. Maybe he never learned to talk.”

“Jes’ because someone don’t wanna talk to *you* don’t make ’em stupid.”

“That is not what I meant,” I snapped at her. “I think it’s very rude of you to be so outspoken with me.”

She looked at me, unfazed. “First I’m stupid; now I’m sassy. Make up yo’ mind, if it ain’t too much of a strain.”

“Don’t you speak to me that way,” I said, growing frustrated. My annoyance appeared to amuse her.

“You white missies ain’t never satisfied. You is mad when I’m not talkin’. Now you is mad ’cuz I got somethin’ to say.”

“I don’t know where you came from, but around here if someone speaks to you, it’s polite to answer respectfully. Now, I am aware you are not pleased with the circumstances, but I believe a degree of cooperation is in order.” She winced, but it was her painful hip quieting her, not my words. She remained still, and then looked up at me.

“No . . .” Her hoarse whisper could barely be heard, yet it took me aback.

“Are you defying my wishes?”

She nudged up on her elbow and stared at me. “No . . . I don’t mind if you call me Livie.”

“Oh.” I nodded, then smiled at her. Now, I was not completely sure, but I believe I saw the hint of a smile, although it quickly changed to a grimace as she shifted to a sitting position. Livie’s toughness humbled and impressed me. If I had been through the ordeal she had endured under Colt’s knife, I would most likely be found helpless in my misery, without the spit and vinegar to utter words, much less move a muscle. But Livie’s face was now full of its natural color, and her eyes were clear and alert instead of drained by fever.

“What’s them fancifuls for?” Livie asked, motioning over to the wool blanket that lay open and strewn with undergarments and the dress I brought with me.

I went over and held up the blue-and-white calico dress. “I thought you might like some fresh clothes, since yours are torn and stained beyond repair.”

The splendor of the dress twinkled in Livie’s eyes, but a skeptical grin crinkled her cheeks. “You must be fixin’ to bury me, ’cuz I’ll be strung up higher than a bird’s nest if I is caught with somethin’ so fine. I’ll be ’cused of thieving from the big house fo’ sure.”

Livie got quite a belly laugh from poking fun at my gesture, until the bite in her side forced her to harness her chuckles. But as I brought the dress near enough for her to touch, she reached out and ran her hand across it. “It surely is a beautiful sight.”

“It was the blandest one in my wardrobe closet.”

Livie’s expression sank, and I realized my choice of words stung her. “I don’t mean to sound callous. My intent was to select one that would not

bring harm and suspicion on you." Livie's wounded expression lifted with her girlish smile. "Besides," I said as I held the dress up against her, "you'll look pretty in it."

The lighthearted moment was short-lived when reality shifted in a direction for which I was unprepared. "Where should I make?" Livie asked bluntly.

"Where should you make what?"

"Water," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Where should I make water?"

A wave of embarrassment flushed me from ear to ear. "Oh, I hadn't considered that. Leaving the cave would be both risky and challenging in your condition. What did you do yesterday?"

"Raizy gave me the bucket yo' man used to carry water here. Then she dumped it in the woods."

"Well, then, that is what we will do," I said, fetching the bucket. "And for the sake of clarity, Colt is not *my man*. He is just a dear friend."

"Is that right?" she mused as she squatted over the bucket. In this moment of awkwardness, Colt's words came back to me: "This is not a little girls' game, Hannah." And for the first time in my life, I was in the humble position of emptying someone's chamber pot.

Livie and I both seemed to look at things differently when I returned from my indelicate task. I helped her wash and change into her new clothes. I replaced the bloodied blanket covering the evergreens with the soft quilt I had brought from the house. When we finally got her settled back down in a comfortable position, it was clear the activity had tired her. I decided to sit with Livie until she dozed off before going back down to Hillcrest to make an appearance and gather some fresh food. As I pulled the second quilt over her, she blinked at me through heavy eyes.

"Up to now, the only white hands that ever touched me was either tryin' to lay me down or whip my hide."

Although Livie's words were spoken matter-of-factly as she drifted off, they made me blush with shame. Not because of their indecorous rawness, but because of their undeniable truth. Once again, I found myself admiring her strength.

Over the next two weeks, I spent most of my time running back and forth to the peak. Other than food, water, and a warm fire, Livie wanted nothing from me. And she offered nothing in return. Getting to know her was harder than cracking a shelled walnut with a downy feather. She remained guarded and distrustful of my attention, but I continued to draw her out while being respectful of the secrets she chose not to reveal. Midway through our second week together, Livie noticed I was unusually quiet. My lack of effort in conversation proved disconcerting to her, because suddenly she was the one asking questions.

“What’s wrong with you, girl? You sick or something? Why ain’t you chirpin’ like a sparrow, same as any other day? Are you gonna ditch me?”

“Of course not, Livie. After nearly two weeks together, does my word mean nothing to you?” I threw my arms up because there was no point in trying to touch someone who is determined to hang out of reach. I sat down by the fire and poked it with a stick. Livie inched her way over and sat across from me.

“Is you mad at me?”

“No, Liv. I am not angry. I am simply melancholy today. My birthday is approaching, which makes me yearn for my parents. I miss them so.”

“Is they dead?”

“They were killed in a wagon accident. I barely remember what they look like.”

Livie patted me on the hand. “I never knowed my daddy much neither. He lived on another plantation, then was sold away.”

“What I remember most clearly is my father’s wonderful laugh.” I smiled as Livie’s protective shell softened to absorb my confession. “Mother and I would sit on his lap in front of the hearth while he made up funny stories and jokes until he had my mother in tears from giggling.”

The memory pinched a sensitive nerve in me. “The home of my birth was so warm and vibrant compared to the disengaged household of Aunt Augusta. Even after all these years, the gentleness of my mother’s unreachable embrace haunts me in the dark of night.”

“Ain’t nothin’ worse on a child than losin’ a mama or daddy. Especially if they go at the same time.”

“Yes, but I was not told the details.” I shrugged. “The night it happened is a hazy blur of hysteria in my mind. A friend of Mother’s was staying with

me while Mother accompanied Father on one of his short trips to do missionary work for the church. People rushed in and out at all hours of the night, whispering and weeping. Early the next day, they packed two trunks with some of my belongings and dropped me in Lexington, where I was put in a carriage for the long ride to Aunt Augusta. She told me my parents had been killed and that I would be living with her at Hillcrest." I paused for a moment to collect my emotions. "I was swept away without even having a chance to place a flower on my mother's grave."

"It's a powerful heartache when loved ones is torn away suddenlike," Livie sighed. I did not speak, for fear of disrupting this long-awaited breakthrough of thoughts and feelings. "My mama was taken away from me too, and I don't think that's a blow a child ever gets over. Even if they live to be a hundred years old, some hurts never mend."

Until now, Colt was my confidant. But there was something special in sharing confidences with a girl of my own age, different as we were. I felt great privilege when Livie squeezed my hand and opened her heart.

Livie was born on a large tobacco plantation in North Carolina that by her description boasted a slave force three times the size of West Gate and Hillcrest. Marcus was the oldest of her four siblings and the only one that remained with her on the plantation of their birth.

For most of Livie's young life, her mother was the personal servant of their master's second wife, a harsh and spiteful woman who was as mean as she was barren. The master, who Livie was careful not to call by name, had a son born of his first wife. When his first wife died, he took a second bride; however, their union proved fruitless. Because of the burden of her childless condition, the mistress forbade any of the slave offspring to be seen or heard in the immediate area of the main house. Therefore, Livie rarely saw her mother until late in the evening when she was dismissed from her duties and allowed to return to the slave quarters.

"But, girl, I swear to you," Livie said with disgust. "Massa was friskier than a jackrabbit in spring, and as soon as the sun disappeared over the hill, Massa followed my mama's tracks through the moonlight until he reached our door.

"He never said much," she continued. "But he usually brought a hickory switch to shoo us chilluns outside onto the porch while he grunted on top of Mama."

Seeing my eyes grow wide, Livie raised a coy eyebrow in my direction. “Don’t be lookin’ at me like you don’t know what a massa is doin’ during his long walks after evenin’ supper. White folk can’t do nothin’ fo’ themselves. Bad enough they expects us coloreds to smile when we be carrying their chamber pots to the outhouse, or soaping their backsides in the wash tub. But we can’t even rest our weary bones without ’em sneakin’ through the shadows fo’ us to do the layin’ down for ’em too.”

I knew Livie well enough to presume her bluntness was designed to make me blush, and without hesitation my cheeks obliged. It was her way of spoon-feeding me bits of reality that were difficult to swallow but necessary to digest. To understand the pain she carried inside, I must know the truth about life in the quarters.

“Livie, what happened to the quiet girl that hid behind her hands and refused to talk to me?” I teased to offset my embarrassment. “You certainly have no trouble speaking your mind now.”

She paused to reflect on what I said, then released a devilish grin. “Guess till now I didn’t know I had a mind to speak.”

As the days passed, I grew more and more attached to my retreats with Livie, in part because I enjoyed the female companionship. The girls of my age around the county were a bit of a bore and did very little to welcome me. They were a close-knit group when I was transplanted here from northern Kentucky, and I was not as delicate and conforming as the others. However, Aunt Augusta insisted I periodically join them in their sewing circle, although there were no close bonds between us. But with Livie, there was no pretense. Her thoughts were real, her words unorchestrated, and her feelings without motive. I warmed in our secret connection, but the stories of her life haunted me. One afternoon as she braided my hair, I reached deeper.

“Livie, did he ever do it to you?”

“Who?”

“The man from North Carolina. Did he do to you as he did to your mother?”

Livie’s hands fell limp as my untied braid unraveled in her fingertips. “He tried once.”

I reached up and took her hand in mine. “Is it why you ran away?”

Livie sat down on the smooth boulder next to me and pulled her dress tight around her folded legs. Without pressing further, I waited and hoped she trusted me with her confidence. Finally, she looked up at me.

“When I was near about ten years old, Massa’s wife took to havin’ nervous fits. One night she came chargin’ down from the big house in her nightclothes, lookin’ for her man, who sure enough was doin’ his business in the cabin with Mama. Well, the missus screamed and cried like a tomcat. She waved a carving knife at me, Marcus, my little brother, Rufus, and my older sister, Daisy, as we waited on the porch. Massa come out and grabbed her just as she was about to slice off Marcus’s ear. Massa dragged the missus back to the big house, where we could hear her wailin’ most of the night.

“Next morning, two of the overseers come and took Rufus and Daisy away as a peace offerin’ from Massa to his crazy wife. Mama begged on her hands and knees for Massa not to sell off her chilluns, but by sundown Daisy was sold south and Rufus was traded off to a dairy farmer for a milk cow. I ain’t never seen neither of ’em again, though Marcus says he seen Rufus from time to time when movin’ harvested crops to town.”

“That’s a heartbreaking story,” I said, as Livie’s eyes glistened but did not shed tears.

“Mama was never the same, and every day she would have to face the missus, who was pleasured by my mama’s misery. But when the dogwood started to bloom, so did Mama’s belly, and when the missus took notice, her nervous fits started up all over again.

“Mama was banned from the big house and forced into the fields. The night the baby came, Massa was in Alabama doin’ business with kin. It was stormin’ fierce, like the night you came up to the peak, so when Missus burst through our door, I knew the devil had come for a visit.

“Mama held tight to the baby girl until the missus walked over and lifted the blanket. After one look at the baby’s caramel skin and brownish blond curls, the missus tore the chile from Mama’s arms. Mama sprang on her before she reached the door. Two overseers beat my mama to the floor. I can still see the hate in the missus’s eyes when she said, ‘Throw this child in the river. Then whip this wretched wench until the only creatures that desire her flesh are the maggots and worms feasting on her lifeless body.’ From that

night on, Marcus and me is all that's left of our family." Livie wiped away tears. "My mama's name was Willow. Ain't that pretty?"

Some voids are not meant to be filled by words. The sympathy and horror in me was impossible to give voice to, so I leaned in close to Livie and pressed my forehead to hers, allowing the silence to speak for me.

"I think survivin' hardship gives us a special way of lookin' at things," Livie said, taking my hand in hers. "We ain't as blind as most folks, and maybe we ain't as afraid neither. We know our heart is strong enough to keep on beatin', no matter how many times it gets thumped on."

It was the first time anyone acknowledged my inner strength and resilience. But Livie was right: My hardships changed me, as they did her, and our destiny along with them. I could not help believing we were meant to be joined somehow; but I shuddered to imagine where our shared destiny would take us.

Chapter 9

By the end of the second week, Livie's wound had healed and melded almost as securely as our new bond. However, she still struggled with a good deal of pain throughout her hip, and although her stamina had improved, a pronounced limp remained. One afternoon as we warmed stew over the fire, we heard a distinctive coo, much like that of a mourning dove. The woeful note was too near and persistent to be of natural origin. Livie jumped to her feet and stumbled toward the shadows before I could tell her that Colt and I often mimicked the birdcall when we were children, using it as a secret warning when something was afoot. I had not heard the signal in years, but I recognized it at once.

"No need to hide, Livie. It's just Colt."

Colt had kept his distance from the peak, and when I questioned him about it, he said there was no reason for him to check on Livie as long as I reported no problems. He felt it was best for him to stay close to West Gate, where he could keep Twitch busy and within sight. So, as he ducked through the cave wall, I had a sinking feeling his visit had purpose beyond the obligatory.

Colt brought along bread, apple butter, and cider. He handed Livie the food before settling next to the fire. I had an intuition when it came to Colt's moods, and it was clear he was troubled.

"How are you feeling, Livetta?"

"Fit enough to run, if need be."

"Now, Livie, don't assume the worst. Colt did not come up here to be rid of you. He knows the fate you would encounter in your vulnerable condition."

All sound stopped and hung in the air around us as Colt lowered his head to study his boots rather than look Livie in the eye. I grew alarmed at his hesitation.

"Tell her, Colt. Tell her you would never do such a thing. . . . Would you?"

"It's not as simple as you present, Hannah."

“Colton Reynolds! You coldhearted—”

“Hush up, Miss Hannah,” Livie said, coming around the fire to stand next to me. “Mista Colt is right: ’Tain’t so simple. Maybe it’s time I find my own way north.”

“Marcus said he would come back for you, Livie. If you leave now, even if you made the journey safely, you may never find each other. He is all the family you have.”

Colt placed a firm hand on each of our shoulders. “Now, hold your tongues long enough to hear me out. Let’s sit and I can tell you what is on my mind.”

He steered us to our seats by the fire and settled on the log pile opposite us. “The way I see it, we are facing a serious problem. Augusta will be back at Hillcrest in two days, and Livetta cannot stay up here indefinitely without being detected.”

“Why not?” Livie countered. “I is doin’ jes’ fine here. Never ate so good in all my life. Back with Massa, there was times when my belly was so empty, I could have ate the soles off my shoes.” Livie laughed as she stuck out her heels to show off the frayed rags tied around her feet. “But I never had a bite’s worth of sole to eat.” Livie chuckled so hard she had to hold her hip to keep from crying in pain. I, on the other hand, was mortified at how much this poor girl had stacked against her. Yet from the smile on her face, you would never know it.

“Livetta,” Colt continued. “Once Augusta returns, Hannah will be restricted from running up and down the mountain to feed and look after you.”

“I can fend fo’ myself till Marcus gets back.”

“I don’t think the two of you understand how long he will be, if ever he does return.”

“Colt . . .”

“I am being practical, Hannah. Their chance of making it north alive is slim enough, but his chance of returning here is even slimmer. I am sorry, Livetta, but it’s the cold, hard truth.”

I reached over and patted Livie’s hand. “Marcus will make it back, Livie. I just know it.”

“Fine, then,” Colt pressed. “Let us say he makes it back, against all odds. Are you aware of how much time will pass while he is navigating such a

journey?”

It was a thought I had yet to consider. Even with a reasonable amount of education and some travel experience, I had no sensible estimation of how far the journey was to the North. And with Livetta’s limited exposure beyond the boundaries of plantation life, she had less understanding of it than I. My wordless stare cued Colt to continue.

“Well, it’s not like taking a five-day carriage ride to Cumberland Gap. They are traveling by foot . . . in the dark . . . guided only by the stars of a clear night. We have no way of knowing what hardships they will face along the way, but you can be sure there will be plenty. Once they are north, they still must go far enough to find a place where they are truly safe. And don’t forget the winter months, when it’s nearly impossible to travel. So, the three of us must be prepared. If Marcus succeeds where most fail, it could be a year or more before he steps foot on Echo Ridge again.”

Livie’s hand tightened over mine with the realization provoked by Colt’s words. I lowered my head to spare her my sullen change of expression. The thought of Livie leaving was unbearable, yet I realized keeping her hidden and safe was not possible. Crazy thoughts filled my head, like hiding her in the vacant cabin at Mud Run or stealing a wagon and taking her north myself. Or maybe . . .

“I have an idea” popped out of my mouth. “I shall buy her!”

Livie took her hand from mine and leaned her blotchy elbows on her knees. Pressing her forehead into the palms of her hands, Livie shook her head from side to side. “Massa won’t never partake in such a deal. He be afraid the others would think I got over on him and make him look a fool. If he finds out I am here he will grab me up fo’ sure. Massa would rather tan a colored hide to save face, even if it means gold coins left on the table. He will gladly pay fo’ the pleasure of vengeance on the poor soul who got over on him. Massa burned the feet of his prize field hand when he ran off to be with his woman after their chile died while birthin’. Massa made him stand in boilin’ water clear up to his knees. That sorry slave was never good fo’ nothin’ again. It’s a mighty spiteful streak that drives a man to render the best of his lot worthless. Worst be told, it took nearly two years fo’ that poor soul’s agony to end. One night, he got his hands on a suckering knife and slit his own throat. Marcus said they found him with a smile on his face.”

If Colt was as mortified as I, it was not reflected in his stony expression. He simply propped his boot on a rock in front of him and tugged thoughtfully at his ear. “It would be hard explaining to Augusta,” he mumbled to himself. “But maybe there is something to be made from Hannah’s idea.”

“Gracious be, Colt,” I said with piqued curiosity. “What are you contemplating?”

“Well, what if I took a day trip and returned with Livetta in hand? I could profess to own her.”

“Is it possible, Colt?”

“I think it’s worth attempting. Livetta may have a chance if our explanation is believable and the papers look authentic.”

I shuddered at the boldness of the suggestion. “Do you know what you are saying? We would be bringing a runaway right under the nose of Twitch and Aunt Augusta. It’s entirely outrageous.”

“Exactly,” Colt said with a sly grin. “A plan so outrageous no one would suspect it. They would have no reason to question my truthfulness. I will wait for Augusta’s return. If I ride in before the dust of her carriage has time to settle, the commotion and fanfare of her arrival will keep scrutiny at a minimum.”

“The risks are enormous.” I put my hand to my breast in hope it would slow my surging heart. I was terrified of the consequences likely to rain down on us if we failed; however, I was equally intrigued by the possibility of Livie staying at Hillcrest with me.

“Of course it’s a precarious choice,” Colt stressed. “But I believe there is greater risk in roaming the countryside with your injuries. What do you think, Livetta?”

Livie had licked her plate clean and set it aside. She stretched her stiff legs in front of her and gently tested their mobility as she considered her options. She cocked her head toward me and drew in a deep, confident breath, punctuated with a nod of her head.

“Well, as sure as flies sit on a dead mare, the likes o’ me is likely to be boiled one way or the other. But so far, Miss Hannah’s done right by me. Now, ya’ll may think Marcus is a know-nothin’ fool fo’ sayin’ he’s gonna come back fo’ me, but my brother’s word is stronger than a hundred-year-

ol’ oak. So I’d best stay put. Anyway, if there’s boilin’ to be done, I jes’ as soon it be done here with you than out in the woods with strangers.”

Colt stood and brushed the dust from the back of his pantaloons. “There’s much to be done. Hannah, see to it that Livetta crosses the river tonight at the Horse’s Bend. Can you swim?”

Livie shook her head with some hesitation.

“It will be a clear night with the glow of a full moon, so it won’t be a blind crossing. Once you are on the other side, head downstream using the heavy trees along the river for cover. You must move with extra caution when you see the candlelit windows of town on the opposite bank.”

“How on earth is Livie supposed to make it across the river and downstream with a lame hip? It’s much too dangerous.”

“I know this is not an easy venture, but it’s the only way. Livetta, you must keep moving as long as possible under the cover of night, but when you see the first hint of daybreak, you should stop and stay out of sight until darkness comes again. South of town, you will come to three large boulders wedged side by side, each a different shade of gray. I will wait for you there. Now, I better get on back to West Gate so I can set in motion some practical reason for making a short trip.”

Colt walked toward the cave entrance and then turned before exiting. “Hannah, after tonight, it is important you are seen in your normal routine at Hillcrest. When Augusta returns, simply let things unfold as they will.” Colt then directed a serious gaze toward Livie. “Livetta, do the best you can. I shall wait two nights for you. If you have not arrived, I will assume you were delivered a different fate.”

The ticking mantel clock taunted me as I pushed my uneaten pork chops around my plate. My mind was crowded with details to sort through and ready for Livie’s journey, but my nonchalance was a necessary part of the charade. Esther Mae peeked through the door to see if I had finished my meal. “Lordy, Miz Hannah, you will be paler than a mornin’ glory on a rainy day if you don’t eat some supper. Miz ’Gusta will have my hide if you take sick.”

“Don’t fret, Esther Mae. I am a wee bit tired is all. Excuse me while I take my plate to my room. I shall retire with the birds tonight.”

The belligerent sun hung low in the evening sky for what seemed like an eternity, illuminating its perverse pleasure in making me wait. With growing anticipation, my mind played out what soon would transpire in the shadowed moonlight. I could follow the path to the peak with my eyes closed. It was as natural to me as geese winging through a crisp autumn night. However, traversing the angled cliffs to the river was territory I had yet to navigate in the dark of night. But even that did not rattle me as much as the thought of what would happen once we came upon the river. Unable to wait any longer, I headed for the cave.

Livie and I cleared away all evidence of her stay. We burned the quilts and pine bed in the fire pit and stacked the unused logs against the inside wall, as if they’d been stashed by a hunter for another day. When all looked undisturbed, we flopped on the ground and rested, side by side in anxious stillness. Finally, Livie heaved a long, jittery sigh.

“I ain’t had no cause for swimmin’ in a mighty long time. There was a fair-sized pond at the edge of Massa’s land where we cooled off when our heads gots’ta spinnin’ in the summer heat. Marcus showed me how to swim ’cuz he said someday I might need the know-how. But ’twas long ago, and I don’t have much kick in this shot-up leg right now.”

I wanted to reassure her, but more importantly, I wanted her to be prepared for what the Red Hawk River demanded. The Horse’s Bend was a half-mile stretch of water between two fierce sets of rapids north of Echo Ridge. This slow and steady stretch of water provided Livie with her best chance at crossing. Still, the Horse’s Bend had its challenges, as evidenced in its name. Legend had it that when the untamed mountain region was settled, a band of renegade Shawnee Indians chased a group of Lutheran missionaries to the river’s edge. When the missionaries rode their horses into the deep current of the Red Hawk, they were sucked under midway across the river. The missionaries eventually pulled themselves up on the banks of what is now Echo Ridge, but not one of the horses ever resurfaced.

With that in mind, I used a stick against the dirt floor to sketch the flow of the river so Livie could picture in her head what she would face once she hit the water. “Now, don’t forget,” I said, circling a spot on the craggy diagram. “We will hike to the bottom of the first set of rapids, and you will

enter the water here. You must swim hard, steady strokes toward the far shore as the current moves you downstream. If you swim fast enough, you will reach a large boulder called Turtleback Rock, which curves above the water halfway between the first and second set of rapids. Grab on to it and catch your breath. When you are ready, you can start a paddle sprint across the far section of the river. When you reach the other side, follow Colt's instructions downriver where he agreed to meet you. Then the second part of our plan will be put into motion."

Contrary to my earlier wish for sunset, now I prayed the sun would freeze to a standstill and remain orange in the sky rather than sink away and lead Livie into uncertain darkness. Betrayed by the natural flow around me, I watched the sun defy my wishes and disappear behind the indigo mountains on the western horizon.

Livie reached into the satchel tied around her waist and removed a strip of stained chambray cloth. I recognized it as part of her brother's neckerchief, used to stop her bleeding the day she was shot. She smoothed its length and then tied it to her ankle.

"Fo' luck," she said, looking up at me. My stomach twisted, knowing our time together was slipping away. She then pulled a tin cigar box from her satchel and handed it to me. "Take this, and keep it safe until I return."

I nodded and smiled to hide my mounting fear. We knelt over the map I had etched in the soil and traced her route one last time. Her eyes were wide and attentive, as if hearing the plan for the first time. "Try not to let the river's strength frighten you, Liv. Never fight against the current. It's a battle that is impossible to win. Flow with it and use its power to help you get where you are going."

Coaxed by the urgent hoot of an unseen owl, we gathered ourselves for our journey down to the river. I scuffed the toe of my boot across the lines in the dirt. My foot stopped at a crude stick figure Livie had carved into the drawing. Twists of familiar braids protruded from the circular head, and a wide crescent smile looped from one side to the other. I don't know if it was fear or superstition that kept my foot from smudging away that innocent expression, but I refused to brush her away into oblivion. Livie's no-nonsense practicality took over as she shuffled her ragged feet across the happy face and erased the last remnant of our time spent together on the peak.

Moonlight bathed down from the forest ceiling, illuminating our path like we were winding our way through a dream. Raccoons and deer scampered as twigs snapped beneath our hurried feet and warned them of our approach. A hint of the day's warmth lingered in the air, giving us one less obstacle to overcome. However, I was certain it would not be a courtesy extended by the bone-chilling waters of the Red Hawk River.

The sweet fragrance of mountain laurel wafted around us as we descended the cliff to the river. Livie kept pace until the heaviness of her pained hip required her to grip the back of her thigh and pull each hard-fought step from her injured leg. Finally, the ground beneath our feet softened and gave way to the mist-covered mud along the river's edge. There, the lower end of the first set of rapids rushed into the slow, swirling currents of the Horse's Bend. Livie and I stepped from the cover of evergreen and let the bright, full moon wash over our tight, breathless bodies. I looked out across the sleek, sparkling blackness that slid bleakly past us, silent and unyielding. In contrast, the rapids feeding her north and draining her south rumbled in the darkness like a stampede of angry cattle. My breath caught in my throat when the silhouette of an uprooted tree twisted helplessly by us, carried by the river like a feather on its current. My heart sank, realizing Livie had less of a chance in the unforgiving current than the dredged tree slowly swallowed by the Red Hawk. It was the first true moment of regret I felt since meeting Livie.

"You should sit for a while, Livie. You will need all the strength you can muster once you enter the river."

Livie limped alongside of me, her dark saucer eyes entranced by the sight of the river. I wondered if she thought a lynching would be a kinder fate.

"Gots'ta keep movin'," Livie said with eyes fixed straight ahead, "so my leg don't have time to stiffen, nor my thoughts time fo' frettin'."

I rested my hand across her shoulders as much for my own reassurance as I did for Livie's. The longer we waited, the harder it would be to go forward, so I drew in an anxious breath and struggled to unearth some parting words of encouragement.

"You will do fine, Livie. Remember what I told you about the strength of the river?"

"Don't fight the current." She nodded. "Jes' go along with the flow so it don't overpower me."

“Swim straight for the other side as you ride the current downstream. Swim swiftly so you make it as far as Turtleback Rock.” I pointed to the dark mound a hundred yards below us. “See it down there, halfway across? Paddle straight toward the middle, and let the water drag you into the rock. Hold tight and rest until you have enough strength to swim the second half.”

“Tell me true, Miss Hannah,” Livie said with the uncertainty of someone about to throw herself into the unknown. “Do you think there’s a chance of me reachin’ the other side?”

How I wished I could keep Livie safe up on the peak. Or, at the very least, offer another option that might be more favorable than this. Here, with the river stretched before us, there was no denying the potential consequences, good and bad. This unspoken thought dropped between us like a ship’s anchor.

“If anyone can make it, Livie, it’s you.”

Livie’s eyes held on to mine through the darkness and would not release me. She paused, as if absorbing my words. Then a crooked grin slowly peeled the gloom from her face.

“Them is the best words yo’ fine breedin’ can come up with?” Her low chuckle took me by surprise. Waves of intermittent laughter came quicker, and shook deep into her belly. “You is sendin’ me into a cold, watery graveyard, sayin’ nothin’ more than, ‘If anyone can make it, it’s you.’ ”

Livie wrapped her arms around her midsection and whooped in amusement. There was absolutely nothing funny about this moment, but the humor embraced by Livie in the face of possible death coaxed me to play along with sarcastic amusement.

“Well, what would you rather I say, girl? ‘Hope you don’t sink like a big’ ol’ rock.’ Or how about, ‘Don’t worry, Livie. I expect the mountain water will freeze you, long before it drowns you!’”

Livie flung her hand over her mouth and stomped her feet in a futile attempt to muffle the burst of laugher that echoed in the woods. “Well, even a nappy-haired know-nothin’ like me has sense enough to say somethin’ powerful like, ‘Heaven’s angels will carry you to the other side, Livie.’”

Her grin was broad and sincere as we stood face-to-face, less than an arm’s length from one another. Our intermittent giggles slowed into a hesitant farewell. An overwhelming need to embrace her filled me in a way

I had not felt in a very long time. Since losing my parents, my heart instinctively did not allow any vulnerable attachments to take root. I had grown comfortable in letting it be so. But somewhere within our bond of trust, Livie had penetrated my emotional fortress. Livie waited, as if sensing that the decision to reach out in friendship was mine, but the impulse to outwardly share my affection retreated back into the cocoon I had spun around me long ago. Or was I retreating from the uncharted complexities presented by our differences? Thoughts to be sorted out another time, I supposed. Now, as I gazed into Livie's clouding eyes, I knew it was time for good-bye.

"I best get on with it," Livie said with moist emotion rising along her short, curled lashes.

Hiding my fear, I blinked back tears and held the warm palm of my hand against her cool cheek. "Heaven's angels *will* carry you to the other side, Livie."

Livie lowered her head, but with a gentle nudge, I lifted her chin so there was no veil between my eyes and hers. "And don't you ever call yourself a know-nothin' again, because you possess more sense and courage than anyone I have ever met. You have the same fire and determination as Marcus, and you *will* make it, my friend."

A wave of composure settled on Livie's face as she lifted her hand for me to grasp. Our fingers intertwined as we stood for a moment, our hands bridged between us, letting the silence speak our feelings. Then, with a burst, she let go and dashed into the river.

Livie pushed deep into the swell. She squealed with each step as the cold water rose against her warm skin. The hem of her dress swirled atop the current and tugged her in the direction of the downstream flow. Livie paused in the moonlight. My hands clenched in prayerful desperation. When she glanced over her shoulder at me, I raised my hand in one last gesture of support. Livie whirled around, took three deep breaths, and plunged into the murky water. Overcome by paralyzing dread, I dropped to my knees in hope that my thoughts could will her to the far riverbank. In the halo of the moon, something fluttered against my heel. There, tangled and spattered with mud, was the chambray neckerchief Livie had tied to her ankle for luck. *An omen*. I popped back up on my feet and pressed the cloth against my bosom.

“Paddle, Livie,” I called as her arms slapped over her head in frantic strokes toward the opposite shore. For each body length she gained across, she lost four or five downstream. Her injured leg was not giving her the kick she needed to plow forward with any degree of gain. Over-matched by the river’s surge, Livie’s frail frame bobbed along its surface like a leaf washed away in a storm. The shadowy profile of Turtleback Rock loomed like an unreachable mirage in the distance.

“Faster, Livie! Faster!” I screamed, no longer caring if the echo of my voice fell on dangerous ears. However, my cries did nothing to change the fact that Livie had not gotten far enough to be within reach of the rock needed for respite.

“Grab on, Livie!” I cried out as she flailed her arms toward the elusive boulder. Its aloof shadow hung far enough from her fingertips to release a long, heart-wrenching cry from the pit of my stomach. “Nooooo!”

I sank to the ground with a gasp when Livie’s outstretched hand fell short of the passing rock, and she disappeared into the dark rapids below.

Chapter 10

I have no recollection of my journey through the woods back to Hillcrest, but I remember well the agony coursing through me while sprawled on my bed, eyes raised and locked on the ceiling. In my mind's eye, I saw the image of Livie slipping away into the roar of the river's fury over and over again. The mantel clock stroked the hours, yet I remained imprisoned in a timeless limbo. I thought I would never escape the torment of night until mercifully the early rising catbirds wailed the coming of daybreak. Wrapped in a shawl, I settled on the front porch with hope the fresh air would clear my head.

By first light, the slave force of Mud Run buzzed in frenzied preparation for the return of Aunt Augusta from her trade excursion. Oddly, their activity transcended the dutiful. Slaves from all corners of Mud Run eagerly anticipated Aunt Augusta's return home. They seemed genuinely attached to her, as she was to them. I never heard Aunt Augusta refer to any of her slaves in derogatory or dehumanizing terms. She called the slaves of Mud Run her Runians. It was almost endearing, and was the one trait for which I respected and admired her. And even though she was a strict and demanding mistress, the Runians knew they were protected within the boundaries of her plantation.

Aunt Augusta was expected late in the afternoon, so from sunup through midday, the Runians scattered with the urgency and teamwork of an overrun anthill. They cleaned the stables, washed windows, and prepared food. All needed to be perfect, so when they gathered to meet Aunt Augusta's carriage as it pulled into the front yard, she would step down with a nod of approval, satisfied that responsibilities were not neglected in her absence. It was a subtle gesture of appreciation that the Runians embraced as affection. I envied them their value in her life.

By midday, the world was alive with plump honeybees bobbing from daisy to daisy along the pillars that framed the entrance steps of the porch. Red-breasted robins combed the emerald grass, tilting their heads close to the ground before delivering a swift peck into the turf to snatch a wriggling

night crawler. Detached from the activity around me, I folded my knees up under my dress and held them tight against my chest, like a child clinging to a security blanket. Not very ladylike, but a natural impulse I indulged in, as no one was present to scold me. As the day dragged on, I grew numb with despair.

Esther Mae carried a wicker basket of freshly washed clothes to the clothesline in the side yard. My dress and stockings needed special care in scrubbing away the iron gray mud of the riverbank. Esther Mae asked no questions nor revealed any dismay over why my clothing was in such soiled condition, but for my benefit, she spent half the morning bent over the washboard, making them spotless before Aunt Augusta's return.

The rumble of wagon wheels coaxed me to my feet. The rhythm of trotting horses grew louder as Uncle Mooney's carriage appeared over the crest of the dirt road rising from West Gate. Twitch sat next to him at the reins, hunched over his knees. With a snarling howl, Twitch pulled the team to a standstill between the carriage house and the front porch.

"Good afternoon, Hannalore," Uncle Mooney said in his deep, stern voice. "I want to extend a dinner invitation to you for this evening. With Colton and Augusta having business elsewhere, it leaves us with each other's company."

"Thank you, Uncle Mooney," I said, unmoved by his hollow gesture. "But Aunt Augusta should be arriving home later today. She will surely be road weary, and I am feeling poorly as well, so I shall regretfully decline your invitation on behalf of both of us."

"Suit yourself, child," he declared with a nod of relief.

Twitch tongued his bulging chaw of tobacco from one cheek to the other. "Oh, come on, Hannah," he wheedled with a seemly grin. "I will be joinin' Mooney as well. Maybe an evenin' with me will warm the chill in your heart."

"That's enough, Twitchell." Uncle Mooney raised his arm in front of Twitch, corralling him like an unbroken stallion.

"Well, maybe our dear Missy here ain't so much sick as she is in need of attention from someone who appreciates her delicate nature."

"I said, 'That's enough,'" Uncle Mooney huffed with impatience rather than anger. Then with a disagreeable tug of his hat in my direction, he said,

“Twitchell and I have business in town. Be sure to let Augusta know the invitation was offered.”

With a snap of the reins, Twitch wrestled the horses back toward the road leading to town and barreled off in a cloud of dust.

As the afternoon shadows lengthened and I fretted over Livie’s fate, I gravitated toward the kitchen, where Esther Mae joined Granny in supper preparation.

“Sit a spell, chile,” Granny said as she waddled to the table and slid a small plate of biscuits and marmalade toward me. Granny Morgan rarely spoke more than a word or two at a time. Mostly she hummed or sang spirituals, deep and aching like the pull of a bow across a bass fiddle. So when she thought it important enough to speak up, it got everyone’s attention, including mine. “Go on, now. Eat up. Be best fo’ all of us if you greet Miz ’Gusta with some color in yo’ cheeks.”

I was happy to oblige her. I cupped the warm tea she set in front of me and let the moist steam rise against my face. Warmth flushed across my skin, releasing the knot of tension that throbbed behind my left eye. Esther Mae swatted the sharp husks of her broom back and forth across the floor, using it to voice the frustration she dare not direct toward me.

“Don’t seem right fo’ the devil to poke me from dusk till dawn with apparitions of Winston strung from a tree, when those breathin’ the same air as me think nothin’ of draggin’ home mo’ work and trouble to set at my doorstep.”

“Hush up, Esther Mae,” Granny boomed, curling the slope of her flat nose to meet the downward scowl of her broad forehead. “Don’t growl at us ’cuz you miss yo’ man. Massa Reynolds will have yo’ hide if he stumbles in on you talkin’ out o’ turn. Go on now and fetch some lemons from the cellar. Miz ’Gusta will expect a cool drink to soothe the thirst of a long day spent in a dusty carriage.”

Esther Mae slowed her broom strokes into contrite circles until she hedged to the door of the root cellar. Then with tight lips and a distant gaze, she slipped from Granny Morgan’s hands-on-hips shadow and left me in a wake of confusion.

“Gracious be,” I sputtered. “I have never seen Esther Mae so upset or speak in such a manner. Why is she having fretful night terrors about Winston?”

“Don’t pay her no mind, chile,” Granny said, shuffling back to the kitchen pump. “She still feels the sting from the whuppin’ my boy, Winston, got in town a ways back. You would be doin’ ol’ Granny a powerful favor if you jes’ fo’get Esther Mae’s sour words. Granny will see it don’t happen no more.”

“They’s comin’! They’s comin’!” Elijah’s cry sliced through the activity on the grounds around the house.

Granny and I both jumped like startled rabbits and set off in opposite directions. Gathering the flounce of my dress, I hurried from the kitchen toward the front porch, while Granny bellowed for Esther Mae to fetch herself out of the cellar. The dozen or so Runians who were not tending the fields scurried after the pickaninnies toddling around the yard. James strode from the backyard, where he was mending a fence. He paused by the stable to remove his straw hat and drag his forearm across his dripping brow. My gaze followed Elijah’s pointed finger across the lower fields to where Aunt Augusta’s coach jostled down the road stretching between the house and town.

The lower fields were planted in well-maintained sections, growing most of the staple crops of the household: potatoes, carrots, onions, snap beans, tomatoes, corn, and an abundance of all else that blessed our table. The Runians lined up in the fields and raised their hands in welcome as Aunt Augusta’s coach rolled past them. Many emptied from their rows and followed in her noisy wake to the front yard. They circled the coach at a respectful distance as James secured the horses to the hitching post. Elijah stood, waving his arms over his head, near James, as Esther Mae rushed by me and placed an embracing arm across her son’s shoulder. She radiated a broad smile of relief. Elijah bolted to the stilled coach and climbed onto Winston’s perch, where his father tousled his hair and handed him the reins. Several Runians unloaded Aunt Augusta’s trunks and carried them to the house. I walked out among them, waiting for Aunt Augusta to exit the coach. Her unreadable eyes scanned the gathering through the window as James opened her door. When Aunt Augusta stepped into full view, she was met with a staggered chorus of “Welcome back, Miz ’Gusta.” She acknowledged them with an attentive nod that signaled each back to their abandoned chore.

“Esther Mae, today’s journey was particularly tiring. I shall retire to my room for a restful spell. You may serve me my refreshments there.” With each approaching step, the hunch in her back straightened into the usual stern posture of her confident shoulders. Her shadow draped across my face as I offered a modest curtsy.

“Welcome home, Aunt Augusta. I hope your trip was pleasant and successful.”

“You are looking gaunt and pale, Hannalore,” she said, examining me with more curiosity than concern. She pressed a cool hand to my forehead. “Are you feeling poorly?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Attend to your quilt squares on the front porch. The fresh air will do you good.” I was relieved when she dismissed me from her query and moved toward the house.

“Yes, ma’am,” I called after her with pleasure in hoodwinking her. If she only knew how much fresh air I had enjoyed during the weeks she was away! I was not foolish enough to push the matter further, so I retrieved my quilt squares and settled into the wicker rocker on the front porch. I busied myself adorning the squares with decorative stitching at a pace intended to make up for all that had gone neglected while I was tending to Livie.

Darkness eclipsed my thoughts the moment Livie came to mind, but I forced my concentration back to the unstitched material folded neatly on my lap. Busying my hands with needlework had been my emotional haven for as long as I could remember. Recollections of my mother and me nestled in front of a glowing hearth often soothed me. I held dear the memory of hours tucked safely in her lap as she guided my untrained hands from stitch to stitch. Patterns of stars, sun rays through treetops, forked rivers, and unusual rock formations were her favorites. And mine too, I supposed, because they were easy to learn and did not require the delicate stitching boasted by the icy debutantes gathered in self-righteous sewing circles throughout the county. I hated their air of superiority. They carried themselves with refined importance based on the misguided opinion that they were wildly desirable. I was surprised when Aunt Augusta did not demand my participation in this social tradition. Perhaps she did not want me viewed as inferior.

It mattered not to me that I and my unrefined needlework were held at bay as awkward outsiders. I cherished those simple patterns of my childhood because they took me home to Kentucky and to the fireside, where I could once again nestle in the warm, comforting memory of my mother. Aunt Augusta allowed me this one indulgence and required I make only occasional appearances in these circles to maintain the appropriate ties. For the most part, I was allowed to sew in the quilting room, where a handful of Runians, who were either too old or unfit to work the fields, were delegated to spinning cloth, making clothes, and working together at the loom, creating quilts.

There was a time when I thought her sisterly attachment to my mother was what stirred Aunt Augusta's cooperation and encouragement in my quilting efforts, particularly because the patterns learned in my childhood were replicated in her household. However, I discovered early on that profit, not sentiment, drove her interest. She garnered great praise from her fellow planters for her inventiveness in gaining cash rewards out of otherwise unproductive slaves. Mr. Watkins of the town mercantile ordered a steady supply of quilts to stock his shelves; a modest profit for Hillcrest, but profit nonetheless. Aunt Augusta expanded this side business to include shops in many towns where she conducted her tobacco business. The demand grew to the point that a large compartment was built beneath her seat in the coach to allow for nearly fifty quilts to travel without chance of exposure to dust or rain.

My disgust in her greediness tempted me to abandon my passion; however, it was offset by the fact that many of the quilts that fell short of salable perfection were dispersed among the Runians, or passed along to Granny Morgan's blind sister, Mabelle, who was owned by Mr. Watkins. Since losing her sight, Mabelle spent long, lonely days rocking her plump, round body on a wooden stool next to the apple barrel outside the mercantile door. She had withdrawn into her own world, rocking and singing the same mournful spirituals Granny Morgan often sang when she was alone in the kitchen. Every Sunday, Winston took Granny Morgan to town so she and Mabelle could spend an hour or two together. It pleased Granny Morgan each time she took an armful of faulty quilts to Mabelle. Her sister enjoyed giving them to needy slaves who passed through town on a master's errand. Instead of being lonely and isolated, Mabelle became so

well-known that slaves from across the county sought out the “quilt singer” during their trips to town. Mabelle looked forward to this social allowance, when news and stories were shared until the visitors had to rush off before their passes expired. Granny Morgan smiled, knowing Mabelle was alive and vital again, and I found myself purposely adding imperfections to completed quilts so Mabelle’s supply would remain abundant. I believed my mother would be pleased at the joy spread by those quilts.

“Wagon a-comin’!”

Elijah’s yelp caused me to prick my finger. I held my stinging finger to my lips and looked to where Elijah hustled with two large buckets sloshing with water. Elijah was our self-appointed lookout, and rarely missed the appearance of a wagon or horse over the far hill. He delivered the buckets at Winston’s feet, and his father paused in grooming the horses to rise on his toes and look over their haunches. An unexpected voice came from the doorway behind me.

“I should have known curiosity would bring Mooney for a visit,” Aunt Augusta said, emotionless.

“Perhaps he is simply passing through on his way to West Gate,” I said casually. “He and Twitch had business in town.”

“Naive child.” She sniffed. I was taken aback by the hint of disdain with which her remark had been delivered. As intertwined as the two plantations were, I always sensed caution and distrust prickling beneath the surface of Aunt Augusta and Uncle Mooney’s familial partnership. Still, I dismissed her mood as fatigue from her trip.

Aunt Augusta stepped out into full view as Uncle Mooney climbed down from the wagon and greeted her with his usual robust banter. As they exchanged some business details, Twitch jumped down from the driver’s seat. When Winston came to hold the bridle of the team, Twitch muttered a few words in his ear that caused Winston to lower his head in obedience. My jaw clenched to keep any words from spilling out that might result in another whipping for Winston. Unfortunately, my anger was fed by brittle emotion left in the wake of watching Livie swallowed by the Horse’s Bend. Elijah’s voice saved me from a foolish outburst.

“A-comin’ a’gin!”

This time, Elijah stood on Uncle Mooney’s wagon bench, tying the loose reins around the brake plank. He motioned his head to where Uncle

Mooney's wagon had appeared moments earlier. I rose from my chair and clutched my chest as Colt's wagon traced the path of wagon grooves up the road. Aunt Augusta's words *naive child* stung me from within as I realized how preposterous it had been for me to hold on to even a slim possibility of Livie making it across the river. Any hope I still harbored was dashed by Colt's lone figure atop the buckboard.

A rush of despair flushed me, and I reached out for the banister to steady me. My hand fell on Twitch's bony shoulder, as he had slithered halfway up the porch steps and positioned himself intimately enough to whisper, "I could swoon you in ways a spineless fool like Purebred would blush over. He don't understand the desires of a real man."

I shrank from Twitch's words . . . his breath . . . his touch. Ever since he suspected my unexplained absences with Colt were for lascivious activity, Twitch oozed lechery when he looked at me. However, with Aunt Augusta hovering nearby, his boldness of words was loathsome, even for him. I ignored his vulgar remarks and crossed the yard as Colt guided his horses alongside those of his father. The late-afternoon breeze tossed his loose curls across his dark eyes, and when they met mine, they quickly diverted away.

"Welcome, son. We thought you would be gone a few more days."

"Maybe his hunger fo' the finer things at home made him turn tail and come on back," Twitch said with his dead eye staring through me. Finally, my glistening eyes locked with Colt's and held on to them, knowing his stoic gaze understood my hidden heartbreak.

"On my way down the lower ridge road, I came upon a family in need of help for their sick child. She was marble-eyed with fever, poor thing. I used sassafras tea and mild laudanum to break a sweat and make her comfortable."

"Mighty commendable, son. Did you charge them for your services?"

Colt tugged his gloves from his hands and jumped down from the rig, all the while avoiding Uncle Mooney's glare. "Damn it, boy, when will you realize that medical service is a commodity, no different from pork or tobacco? If you insist on wasting time and resources unproductive to our plantation, I expect that at the very least you should profit from your endeavors. Anything less is dag-blamed frivolous!"

“They were a modest family with a long journey ahead. I did not wish to squeeze a few precious coins from them,” Colt countered, though his defense fell on deaf ears. Most of Colt’s generosity and accomplishments in the venue of medicine were met with impatience and apathy. I ached to offer a word of admiration to offset the lack of respect given to him by his father, but grief had drained me of thought and reason. However, Colt did not slink away to lick his wounds. Instead he shifted his shoulders into fullness.

“Fact is, they did give me something for my efforts on behalf of their child,” he said, nodding toward his wagon. The buckboard creaked atop its axles with a subtle movement from within. My heart jolted alive when a pair of large, fearful eyes peeked up over the wooden plank behind the bench seat of the wagon. *Livie!*

My mind buzzed with excitement and disbelief. It was all I could do to keep from running past the dropped jaws beside me to throw my arms around her in euphoric relief. With their eyes glued to the battered, dark stranger crawling from the buckboard, Aunt Augusta, Uncle Mooney, and Twitch missed the beaming smile and swell of tears that came upon me before I tempered my emotion. Colt stole a glance my way, and though his expression remained blank and contrived in the masquerade, there was a glimmer of triumphant satisfaction conveyed in the split second when his eyes spoke to mine.

“Have you lost your senses, boy?” Uncle Mooney sputtered. “What do we need with another young wench?”

“And not a prize piece neither,” Twitch added as he stepped closer to get a better look. “From the looks of her, she’s damaged goods.”

Indeed, Livie looked ravaged. Her hair, which had been wound in tight braids when last I saw her, was now pulled loose and standing wild in every direction. She had a dark knot on her forehead, and the lower corner of her mouth was grossly swollen. As Twitch slowly circled around her, Livie struggled to stand strong and steady. Her pronounced limp had given her away, and to those scrutinizing her, she appeared frail and deformed in some way as she clutched her upper thigh and slouched to one side.

“What a pathetic specimen,” Uncle Mooney said as he lifted his walking stick and pressed the tip against Livie’s shoulder, attempting to upright her. “She’ll be of no use in the fields.” He then lowered his stick and thumped

the gold sow head atop the cane in his thick pink hand. “What good is a wench that can’t earn her keep, much less contribute to the care and harvest of our cash crop?”

Twitch scoffed as he ran his hand across her arm, toward her heaving breast. “From the mangy look of her, she won’t even make a good breeder.” Colt stepped over and grabbed Twitch’s wrist before his hand reached its destination. Livie glared up at Twitch, causing him to twist his face into a snarl.

“What are you lookin’ at, you worthless darky?” He reached for the whip looped on his belt. “I don’t know where you come from, but round here you’re gonna know your place.”

As quickly as the whip unraveled to the ground, Colt moved in between Livie and Twitch. “She is of no concern to you,” he said, staring at Twitch. “Or you,” he added, turning to look over his shoulder at his father. Then, with his hand he gave Livie a gentle shove toward me. “If Augusta approves, I would like to give her to Hannah.”

“What?” Aunt Augusta and Uncle Mooney said in acrimonious harmony. She arched her eyebrow and waved a dismissive hand. “I have no intention of getting involved in this ridiculous matter. And I certainly will not have my household burdened with any more charitable causes.”

The bite of Aunt Augusta’s remark reflected back at me in Livie’s anxious eyes, which softened as she came nearer to me. With her back to the others, she winked devilishly and rolled her eyes up and down toward her feet. Perplexed, I finally glanced down and caught a glimpse of the reason for the prideful smile: a brand-new pair of hard-soled shoes. Livie’s bruised face glowed like she was wearing a queen’s dowry. The utter innocence of her delight filled my heart, and in spite of the risk, I widened my eyes with excitement, which was all the moment allowed. Colt’s determined plea brought me back to the perilous charade we were enacting.

“Hannah will be celebrating her birthday in a few weeks, and she is coming to the age where a personal servant would be appropriate. Given the circumstance befallen me, I would like to offer this slave girl to Hannah as a gift.”

“Don’t be fool- hearted, boy,” Uncle Mooney said with disgust. “This coal black wench is not of proper stock for house duties. Cut your losses

and send her to Richmond for auction. She may not command much in price, but at least you will profit from your time and trouble."

Following Colt's lead, I jumped in. "I truly don't deserve such a generous gift, Colt, although being the only lady-in-waiting within the circle of girls my age to be without a personal servant has been a bit awkward at times. I suspect Aunt Augusta intends to purchase a slave girl of high value and put those of my peers to shame."

My words nudged Aunt Augusta's frugal nature into the debate. She ran her hard eyes up and down Livie's bent frame and then tapped her pursed lips with an impatient finger. "Mooney, the boy is old enough to make a man's decision. If he has made up his mind, then so be it. I have serious doubts about her stock, but if I find her unsuitable, I will send her to the fields." Aunt Augusta took the ownership paper from Colt's hand and shoved it in her pocket without a glance. "*My* fields, of course, since she now belongs to Hannalore."

"Thank you, Colt," I said with a curtsy. "You are indeed a gentleman."

"Esther Mae, take this sorrowful creature down with the Runians and clean her up," Aunt Augusta said, turning on her heels and motioning the two on their way. "Bring her to me in the morning and we shall see what we can make of her."

Colt smiled and offered a soft tug of his hat. I marveled at him as he climbed up onto his wagon and cracked his team into action. Twitch stepped from the cloud of dust that swirled between us and watched Livie hobble down the hill toward Mud Run. "Somethin' don't sit right with that lowly chattel. Did you lay eyes on them sturdy shoes? She probably stole off with 'em 'cuz she's a-runnin'."

Uncle Mooney shot out a belch of laugher. "Twitchell, you think every slave from here to Louisiana is a runaway. Not that I mind, boy," he said, slapping Twitch firmly on the shoulder. "Any profit Colton throws away, you bring back to me tenfold with your instincts and tracking skills. But you are crazed like a hound in the thick of a hunt. I swear you would chew off your own foot if it kept you from hog-tying a runaway. Keep your head about you, boy. That pathetic wench is a throwaway, not a runaway." Uncle Mooney's reddened face appeared over Twitch's shoulder as they watched Livie disappear into a cabin below. "The only thing not sitting right in my eyes is money taken from my till and dropped into Augusta's pocket."

Twitch angled himself in such a way that Uncle Mooney could not see the slow wink offered me from the hollow of his dead eye. “Well, the wench must be mighty good at somethin’ to receive such fine shoes from the master of the house.”

“Watch yourself, boy,” Uncle Mooney said, mounting his wagon. “There is a young lady present. Now, let’s get on back to West Gate and take care of our own business.”

“Oh, I’ll watch myself all right, along with a lot of other things round here,” Twitch grunted. He looked at me with penetrating fierceness, then glanced toward the shadowed cabins of Mud Run. “ ’Cuz in *my* business, the watchin’ never ends, and there ain’t nobody better at it than me.”

Chapter 11

Spring gave way to summer, taking with it the entrenched loneliness I had known within the walls of Hillcrest. I listened breathlessly as Livie told me of her battle across the river. “Every drop of know- how in me told me to fight like a bear ’gainst dat ol’ river. It pushed and bullied me every which way. My leg hurt mighty bad, but I kicked as best I could. I thought I was doomed when the water yanked me past the Turtleback. The river was fixin’ to swallow me up fo’ sure.”

I held tightly to her arm as she continued. “But then I paid mind to your warnin’ words about not fightin’ the river, so I stilled my arms and used them to protect my body as dat howlin’ river threw me ’gainst a big ol’ slippery rock, then another, then another, till I jes’ stopped thinkin’ ’bout ’em. Marcus used to laugh and say, ‘ Livetta, you is powerful stubborn and hardheaded.’ Well, I was mighty glad fo’ both of them curses when I was in the nasty grip of the current. I flat made up my mind that even though a lowly soul like me can’t win a battle with the river, if I was mule enough to keep my chin above the water, then the river couldn’t win neither.”

“Oh, Livie,” I gasped. “You are so brave. I would have been paralyzed with fear and destined to sink to the bottom of the Horse’s Bend with a dozen helpless nags waiting to greet me.”

“Nonsense, Miss Hannah,” she said with a confident shake of her head. “Marcus says you never know the gumption you got down inside of you till somethin’ pokes you hard enough to let it loose. I guess I am proof no truer words was ever spoken.” Livie tempered a prideful grin, but a giggle unleashed it across her face.

“How can you laugh at such an ordeal? My heart is pounding harder than James’s hammer on an anvil. I was frightened to death you were gone forever!”

Livie’s expression changed to bewilderment at my emotion. “Why would you waste a worry on the likes o’ me?” Before I could answer, the excitement of the story returned to her face. “At sunup, I found myself laid out in a shallow bog, lookin’ like I was hog- tied to the back of a wagon and

dragged across the fields.” She chuckled as she pressed her fingers to the bruised knot on her forehead. “After fussin’ with the river, I had to think about what was waitin’ fo’ me on the other side. The river ain’t the only thing a soul like me should never fight against. I didn’t want to find out there was worse ways of dyin’ than by a fit o’ water. So I set off, jittery as a rabbit, and found Mista Colt by the three gray rocks, jes’ like he tol’ me. I half expected him to be there with his rifle cocked. Figured this was his chance to get rid of his problem without you knowin’. Lucky fo’ me, he carries mighty special notions about you and him, ’cuz there he was waitin’ fo’ me with a right smart plan to keep the bad from comin’ to me till Marcus gets back.”

I refrained from letting my doubts about the return of her brother snuff the joy that lit up Livie’s eyes, so I simply reflected her smile and said, “Colt helped you because it’s the least he could do after he shot you and foiled your escape.”

“Well, I never knowed anybody who gave a second thought to shootin’ a colored. All I know is when I saw them fine new shoes propped on the edge of the buckboard and Mista Colt said they was fo’ me, I knowed from then on he was fixin’ to keep his promise. Now, here I sit on a soft bed in the heart of the big house. Can’t help but smile, thinkin’ about the strange path I been on since the day I was shot lame in the meadow.”

Although we followed vastly different paths to the same moment, I must admit that the thought of it made me smile too. Livie settled in the vacant cabin under the hickories speckling Mud Run. Aunt Augusta ordered Fatima moved from her family’s cabin and in with Livie so she could teach her the ways of Hillcrest. There was no disguising Livie’s awe when she took her first steps through the pantry door and into the kitchen. She ran tentative fingers over the smooth table and across the gold-leaf china. She drank water from the kitchen pump and ate a dollop of apple butter from a jar in the pantry.

“Won’t life be grand in the house? You will have no burdens here,” I stated proudly.

Livie shrugged with ambivalence. “Mama always tol’ us walkin’ through the big house ain’t near as bad as trudgin’ through the fields, but it sure do make it easier fo’ the massa to keep yo’ soul in a cage when you is right under his nose.” She paused and took stock of the strange world around her.

“Still, a full belly and warm feet is a mite better than blistered hands and a broken back.”

I was confused by Livie’s lack of enthusiasm, but I realized more and more how little I knew about the slaves around me. The Runians appeared content enough and treated better than most, but I never paid them much attention one way or the other. Now I was feeling a bit tentative and off balance, but I sensed Livie felt the same, so we relied on the thread of trust we had sewn between us, and forged on.

By the time the maple trees yellowed and acorns dropped from the oaks, Livie had grown accustomed to the favored position of house slave, though occasionally I would find her gazing from my bedroom window toward the bent figures that labored in the distant fields. Free from physical strain and given time to heal, Livie grew stronger and her limp all but disappeared. Fatima and I taught Livie some basic stitches so she could join in the quilting. In spite of hands accustomed to field work, Livie learned quickly and developed a delicate touch. Her talent gave me great satisfaction, because I was confident these skills would give Livie greater value in Aunt Augusta’s eyes.

With Livie sharing my days, I was content in warm companionship. She accompanied me on walks, helped with the sewing, and rode with me into town to buy fabric and supplies. I had no idea I had such fondness for chatter. Perhaps my years at Hillcrest, sequestered in my unobtrusive existence, had me believing I was shy and complete in my own company. But sprinkled with Livie’s attentiveness and curiosity, I unfolded in ways I never dreamed possible. In fact, we both unearthed surprises in each other.

After much prodding, I discovered Livie could read. “Why you lookin’ so slack-jawed? Jes’ ’cuz a colored got no time nor means fo’ learnin’ don’t mean we ain’t got smarts in our head.”

“Livie, my surprise is not that you are bright,” I said, not wanting to bruise her pride. “My surprise is in you having access to a book. I cannot imagine any of the Runians entertaining such boldness.”

“Nothin’ bold about it,” she said with a raised eyebrow. “The massa and overseer can watch and command our hands and our footsteps, but ’tain’t a soul born on this earth can oversee the thoughts in our heads. Mud Run ain’t no different.”

“Who taught you to read, Livie? Was it a kindly white abolitionist? I have heard tell of their efforts to educate slaves.”

Livie shook her head in disgust. “I never met a kindly white *anything* . Befo’ you, I mean. Didn’t even know there was such a creature. My mama kept a Bible no bigger than a thick slice o’ bread hidden under the floorboards of our cabin. Many a night we huddled round the fire and she would whisper stories ’bout sweet Jesus and the land o’ milk and honey. She read stories about a better life in the Promised Land. Mama always finished by sayin’ it didn’t matter none if the stories was hard to believe at times. She said learnin’ how to read the words would bring the Promised Land to our doorstep. After Mama was gone, me and Marcus found great comfort readin’ them stories.” A wave of melancholy gave Livie pause. “Where’s the tin box I gave you in the cave? Mama’s Bible is inside with some other keepsakes.”

“While you are here in my room, you can read any book you please,” I said, fetching her box where it was hidden in my wardrobe. I immediately blushed, knowing that would do little to ease the ache in her heart. “I am sorry, Liv. I know it will not bring back your mother.”

“Don’t feel sorry, Miss Hannah. All I need of Mama is right here,” she said patting her bosom. “ ’Tain’t never gonna lose that.” She opened the box and removed the Bible. It was tattered and cracked at the edges, but glimmered like a treasure in Livie’s eyes.

Conversations such as this one left my head spinning. Little glimpses into a life so different from mine added texture and depth to the connection between us. I was humbled by how pale my own confessions were compared to those of Livie. But they were all I had, and who I was. Without judgment, Livie took them in and held them as gently in her heart as I did hers.

“I ran away once,” I let slip one afternoon.

Livie looked at me in astonishment. Taken off guard, she laughed. “Escapin’ the horror of all these riches, I suppose.”

My cheeks stung with embarrassment as she chuckled with sarcasm. “Well, it was not as perilous as what you have been through, but to a heartbroken little girl, alone with an aunt who did not want her, it was quite a frightening ordeal.”

Livie softened when she heard the hurt in my voice. She came over and wedged in next to me on my chair. “Tell me what happened?”

“Oh, nothing, really.” I shrugged, wishing I hadn’t mentioned it. “The next day, Mr. Watkins found me behind the mercantile. I wept the entire ride back to Hillcrest.”

I looked over at Livie, who had slid her arm around my shoulders. “You must think I am a silly ingrate for running off from someone who clothed and fed me, and provided me fine things.”

Livie rubbed her hand against my back. “I won’t never think yo’ feelings are silly, Miss Hannah. ’Cuz they is yours, and that makes ’em important to me. Anyway, runnin’ off ain’t always about gettin’ away; sometimes it’s jes’ a soul tryin’ to get to somewhere else. Someplace better, where you find what you’re longin’ fo’. Truth is, there is pain in every kind of runnin’.”

Sharing my secret thoughts and experiences was intoxicating. As I revealed and sorted them out with Livie, I felt more defined as a person, instead of a detached illusion of what Aunt Augusta allowed me to be. However, I began to notice a subtle shift and coolness in Livie’s demeanor. By the time the last of the northern snow geese disappeared over the southern horizon and the first mountain squalls announced the bleak winter months were upon us, I noticed most of our time was spent with me talking while she nodded and agreed. Even my efforts to coax the ease back into our conversations were met with “Yas’sum, Miss Hannah” and “Whatever you likes, Miss Hannah.” At first the coolness concerned me. Then it frightened me. I missed the warmth and eagerness between us. Finally, one evening when she stayed with me at the house while Aunt Augusta was in town at a vigilance meeting, I sought out what was troubling her.

“I ain’t troubled, Miss Hannah.” She shrugged without looking up from her task of polishing my vanity. “Jes’ keepin’ up with my duties and bein’ a proper house slave like the others.”

I walked over and placed my hand over hers where she circled a rag against the glistening oak finish. “But you are not like the others, Livie. Not to me.”

After a moment of hesitation, Livie finally looked up at me with detached eyes. “I ain’t no different from the others, Miss Hannah. I is a Runian now, same as the rest. Only difference ’tween them and me is you gettin’ to know

me from the inside. You found hurtin' scars on my heart same as yours. You've seen what raises my tears, and what haunts me come sundown. But that don't make me different from the other Runians. They all got scars and tears they live with, same as me."

"I didn't mean to sound callous," I said, still holding tight to her hand. "But I want you to know how special you are to me."

"I is jes' a slave girl, Miss Hannah, doin' fo' you what a slave girl is supposed to do."

Livie's declaration stung me because I had assumed our arrangement made her happy. Her life was far better than what she had known before coming to Hillcrest. Yet I could not take offense at her words, because she had indeed been doing for me what any slave girl would do: fetching my water, washing my clothes, turning down my bed, and even emptying my chamber pot. I believed these activities were important to maintain appearances and keep suspicion at bay. Over time and without me noticing, we had fallen into traditional roles even when we were behind closed doors and the veil of appearance was not necessary. Livie wasn't complaining; she was simply stating the truth.

"Livie, please call me Hannah."

Livie grew stiff. "I can't do such a thing, Miss Hannah. If anyone heard, they would stake me to the ground and whip me dead."

I squeezed both her hands now. "I have tried to protect you by having you address me as your mistress, but when it is only you and me, you have nothing to fear. I do not want the charade we must abide by to come between us. I am heartsick that my insensitivity was not clearer to me sooner."

"But I *is* yo' slave girl," Livie said. "Can't be nothin' else."

"You are not my slave girl, Livetta. I do not own you, remember? We are only pretending, plain and simple. You are my friend, and my friends call me Hannah. So here, where you are safe, please call me Hannah. I hope you think of me as a friend too."

"Of course I do, Mi—" Livie hesitated with warmth filling her eyes. "Of course I do, Hannah. Jes' a mite confusin' is all. I never knowed a white heart and a colored heart could beat together in friendship."

I smiled. "My mother once told me that a good heart is one of life's greatest treasures, and it doesn't matter if it's dressed in black or white. So I

believe when you find a good heart, you ought not let it go." I turned Livie's hands upright between us and formed the promise bridge taught to me by her brother. "You are my *friend*, Livie. And I promise to treat you with proper respect, so you will never doubt my feelings again."

Livie's intertwined fingers tightened among mine as her voice quivered with emotion. "You are my friend too, Hannah Blessing. I promise when we pretend and fool folks, if I get to feelin' lowly, I will tell you why I'm hurtin' like a true friend is supposed to do."

The tears straining against my lashes burst free. We fell into each other's arms and let our tears flow. Clinging tight to Livie, I realized how true and committed I was to my words and feelings for her. Her warm embrace told me her feelings ran as deep. Contrary to the world around us, our lives had grown together in friendship, and in spite of the risks it presented for each of us, I knew the wall we had broken through would never rise between us again.

Livie eased into life at Hillcrest like a stray goose blending into the shifting pattern of the greater flock. After some initial coolness and resentment by some of the field Runians, Livie was slowly taken in as one of their own, and she was at home among them. This was largely the result of Esther Mae and Granny Morgan taking Livie under their wings. They carved a place for her in the long-standing and well-defined hierarchy of Mud Run. Generally, new purchases added to the lot struggled to find their place, but the respect and honor commanded by Granny Morgan, as well as by Winston and Esther Mae, signaled approval of Livie's presence even though her instant station in the main house could have left her ostracized by the more burdened Runians.

The Virginia sun drained of its warmth, as the final weeks of Indian summer slipped away, beginning what Livie called "shoe-wearin' time." The sun of early winter was no more than an obligatory glare, and in its shortened presence, the earth was left waning, void of its mild caress. Once the harvest feast had passed, the plantation settled into a new routine. Contrary to the shortened days, Hillcrest was burgeoning with activity. Soon, the eve of the annual corn shucking was upon us, marking the day when Aunt Augusta and I would depart on a pre-Christmas journey to visit a distant cousin in Roanoke. There we would join in the social events and festive atmosphere offered by a city alive with holiday activities. The

adorned streets would welcome us with carolers huddled under lampposts. Shopkeepers with windows laden in ribbon would dip hot cider into porcelain cups meant to warm the chilled hands of shoppers, who ducked from one establishment to the next. On most of the trips made by Aunt Augusta, Winston would drive our coach, but this time he would stay behind in Mud Run. Colt occasionally took the reins in Winston's absence, which made my time in Roanoke fun and exciting, as he accompanied me to formal balls or escorted me around town. However, more often than not, Aunt Augusta requested that Twitch make the journey, much to Colt's chagrin. One year as Colt pleaded his presence, I overheard her tell him that taking Twitch to another county during the shucking celebration was her gesture of goodwill, rewarding the Runians for another fruitful year. Colt shook with laughter, which made Aunt Augusta's hardened face soften momentarily into an unguarded smile. However, the good humor it stirred in me was fleeting, because with Colt on an extended stay in Richmond for the purpose of education and medical study, my time away would be spent within the restraints of Aunt Augusta's shadow, while Twitch disappeared into the gin halls that peppered the back alleys in the lower part of town. He would eventually resurface, bathed in the scent of stale liquor and bordello perfume.

So now, gazing down from my window at the combined gathering of West Gate slaves with our own Runians hauling harvested corn up onto mountainous piles near the cribs in the far field, I knew it was time for me to stop dillydallying. Aunt Augusta wanted my bags packed by sundown. At first light, we would be on our way.

I sighed and turned from the window when a surprising sight caught my eye and made me pull my drapes wider. It was Livie skipping up the hill from her cabin below. I never saw her filled with such lightness, and though I could not hear her, I could see by the lilt of her mouth that she was singing. She waved happily at three Runians carrying a barrel filled with cider meant for the festivity below. Livie had been out since midday, helping Esther Mae with some chores, so I could not imagine what had her feeling so gay. When she reached the front yard, she hesitated to smooth her dress and temper the smile on her face before heading into the house. In a few short moments, she was tapping on my bedroom door and letting herself in.

“Sorry I was gone such a spell. I was helpin’ ’em make applesauce and hominy fo’ the shuckin’ feast.”

I saw my perplexed gaze reflected in Livie’s eyes. “How come you is so down-spirited, girl? Shuckin’ day is grand times, Hannah, even ol’ Massa left shuckin’ day to his coloreds.”

“I guess I fail to understand what is so special about another day of work. I see those mounds of corn growing out there. By the time I leave tomorrow, those piles will be nearly as high as the window of my room. I cannot imagine getting excited over all those ears waiting to be shucked and cribbed.”

“Girl, I never knowed a soul who didn’t think shuckin’ day was fo’ feelin’ fine,” Livie said, with a girlish clap of her hands. Then as if the whole of what I said penetrated her giddiness, Livie looked at the open trunk in the corner, then back at me. Her bright face drained gray.

“Did you say you is leavin’ tomorr’y? Where is you goin’, Hannah?”

When I heard the panic in her voice, I realized how much I dreaded going away. Livie and I had yet to spend a day apart since she came to Hillcrest, and for the first time in my life, I would miss and worry over something I left behind. *Someone* I left behind. Livie’s wide eyes reflected the same anxiety.

I reached for Livie’s hand. “I travel with Aunt Augusta to Roanoke this time of year. We shall be gone for only a week . . . two at the most.” My forced enthusiasm and reassurance were unconvincing, even to me.

Livie squeezed my hands tight in hers and struggled to speak. Finally, she said hoarsely, “But I don’t want you to go.”

“Everything will be fine, Livie. I saw how happy you were skipping up the hill earlier. You and the Runians will celebrate your joyous occasion.”

“Joy ain’t never come knockin’ on my door,” she said, wilted. “It ain’t joy that makes us laugh and sing round the shuckin’ fires. It’s jes’ a time when Massa pays no mind to us fo’ a spell. Can’t help but smile because shuckin’ day brings thoughts of Marcus, Mama, and t’others ticklin’ over me, but it sorrows me a mite too, missin’ them like I do. I wish you was gonna be around, is all.”

Livie was inviting me into a part of her life that until now had remained out of reach in the shadowed corners of Mud Run. I sensed it would lead me into the pained cracks and crevasses of her heart as well. I was honored

and terrified at the same time. Livie was offering me another thread to sew between us, and I was not about to let it unravel by letting go.

“I will feign illness,” I said, to her delight. “As it is, Aunt Augusta believes me fragile as a flower, so fooling her shan’t be difficult.”

We buried our faces in the feathered pillows to contain our squeals. Then we rolled over on our backs and breathed a sigh of relief. Livie took my hand with ease. The gesture reminded me how far we had come.

“Guess *crazy* don’t know no difference ’tween colored and white,” Livie said with half a grin.

“I never knew the same could be said of friendship,” I said proudly. “But look at us.”

Livie propped on her elbows and creased her brow with serious intent. “We gots’ta be careful all the way round. Marcus always says a hateful heart can beat in colored and white alike. Skin don’t make nobody all right or all wrong. We is goin’ against the grain, and trouble can come at us from any which way.”

The distant rhythm of warmhearted spirituals rose through the trees of Mud Run, but the caution of Livie’s words shivered within me. I was naive in many things, but of this, I was not.

Chapter 12

***"C**ome on, we gots'ta go!" Livie threw back my quilts and dragged me across the darkened room. She tossed a pillow against the baseboard of the far wall, then planted her hand on top of my night bonnet and pushed my head down between my knees.

"Livie, what has gotten into you?" I sputtered in disbelief.

She pushed my head lower and whispered, "Hush up, Hannah. Jes' put yo' head on the pillow and kick yo' feet up befo' it's too late!"

In a tangle of arms and legs, and before I could let loose another word, there I was, upside down like a child, using my long, exposed legs to steady me in a headstand against the wall. Livie quickly gathered the hem of my nightgown, which was heaped around my head on the floor, and tied it together up around my ankles. Then off she ran to the bedroom door. She pressed her hand and an ear against its smoothness, and waited for the sound of footsteps. The pressure of blood flowing to my overturned head made my eyes throb heavily in their sockets. Finally, when dizziness and impatience made evident our actions were downright foolery, I allowed myself a grumble.

"I hope this is a bizarre nightmare, Liv, because if this is really happening, you are completely out of your mind."

A chuckle tumbled through the darkness. "I ain't the one standin' on my head," she hushed wryly. We both giggled until I noticed from my upside-down view the glow of lamplight approaching my bedroom door. The illuminated outline of Livie's silhouette scampered toward me.

"Hurry, Hannah! She's comin'!" Livie toppled me over and pulled me to my feet. With my head spinning and my nightgown still tied around my ankles, I hopped across the room and onto the bed. Livie yanked the blankets up under my chin, then darted to the washbasin. Then, as smooth as a night crawler slipping into the earth, she twirled a moist cloth through the water in my basin and folded it across my forehead just as Aunt Augusta creaked opened the door and entered the room. She moved toward

me in expressionless silence. At my bedside, she touched the wick of her lamp to the candle on my bed table, and a fiery glow rose around us.

“Livetta says you have taken ill.”

“Yas’sum, Miz ’Gusta,” Livie cajoled as she straightened the cloth on my brow. “She been tossin’ and turnin’ all night.”

“I am speaking to Hannalore,” Aunt Augusta said with a bite of reprimand. “Go downstairs and assist Esther Mae with my belongings.”

Offering a dutiful nod, Livie walked away, glancing over her shoulder long enough to give me a sideways smile and encouraging shake of her head. Her display of confidence bolstered my courage as Aunt Augusta leaned close to my face.

“You do appear flushed and a bit glassy-eyed. Perhaps I should postpone our trip and send word to Lows Hollow for Dr. Waverly to come at once.”

“Such a fuss is not necessary. It’s just one of my silly spells. I am sure it will pass with a day or two of bed rest.”

“Well, I suppose there is no point in dragging you all the way to Roanoke just to lie in a sickbed. But I detest being here during the mindless commotion that will be in full fashion by nightfall.” Aunt Augusta shook her head. “I have always contended that this festivity centered on the shucking of corn is nothing more than a frivolous allowance with no respectable purpose. Still, the tradition brings focus and enthusiasm to the completion of a major chore. However, I prefer not to bear witness to it.”

“There is no need for you to stay, Aunt Augusta. Livie will see to it I have what I need.”

Aunt Augusta mulled over my suggestion. “If I go, you must be firm with Livetta, or she’ll be carrying on with the Runians. Her duties are here with you. In fact, I shall instruct Esther Mae to keep watch over you as well.”

“As you say, Aunt Augusta.”

It was daybreak when I finally heard her coach rumble up to the house. Twitch grunted for Winston to load Aunt Augusta’s trunks onto the back. With the snap of the reins and a harsh *“Gad’dup,”* they were on their way. I slipped from my bed and peeked through my window dressings to enjoy the sight of the coach rolling over the crest of the far hill. No sooner was it gone from view when Livie burst through the door.

“You ready fo’ your first shuckin’ day?” She grinned.

I was touched by the excitement shining in her eyes. She came to me and wrapped me in a grateful embrace. “I know this don’t seem proper, but I sure is glad you is here. Now, you best crawl back into bed for a spell while I help Esther Mae and t’others. It’s gonna be a late night!” With that, she planted a kiss on each of my cheeks and waved good-bye.

I dozed beneath the warmth of my covers until calls of laughter through a brilliant morning pulled me from my bed. The strange, offbeat nature of the day was apparent the moment I looked down across the lawn and saw the Runians milling about the grounds. Most carried bundles or buckets. However, their steps were relaxed and casual, not frenzied or fetching in the way I generally observed them. They dotted the landscape in every direction from Mud Run to the distant hillside of West Gate. All were seemingly drawn to the stretch of lowland between the two plantations where the three towering mounds of harvested ears of corn lay in wait for shucking. Threads of smoke twirled from several cook fires tended by a group of Runians under the watchful eye of Granny Morgan. Enthralled, I did not notice the tap against my bedroom door until Livie appeared behind me. She rushed over, pitcher in hand, to fill my washbasin with warm water.

“Shake a leg, girl. You better let Esther Mae feed you befo’ she gets called away to the fires. There’s lots o’ cookin’ to be done down there. My mouth is a-waterin’ at the scent of ham hocks and greens warm in the pot.”

“My goodness, Livie, you are more excited for a day focused on a monumental task than I am for the holiday ball Aunt Augusta hosts every Christmas Eve.”

In practiced motion, Livie gathered my hair in one hand and dipped a washcloth into the basin. The warm cloth soothed me as she ran it down the back of my neck and across my shoulders as she spoke. “Well, scrap meat and castoff pickin’s might not please a belly used to roasted turkey with fancy dressing, but they is indeed a blessed feast compared to the corn pones and hominy we usually scrape from our pots night after night, never no different.”

Feeling a bit prickly, I shot back, “I always make certain you have a good meal, either by leftover or smuggling extra from the table. I cannot understand why you are so stubborn about refusing my care. I think you are ashamed of my affection for you. As if you are somehow better off with

scraps from a slave table instead of enjoying what I share from mine. Have I not tried to ease your burdens?"

"Of course you have, Hannah, 'cuz you favor me," Livie said, her eyes wide with unguarded honesty. "And I appreciates it mighty. But it don't make it easy fo' me to walk among the others, them knowin' I have more than I should. You is extra careful so that what you give me doesn't cause yo' people to rise up against you. I gots'ta do the same about the gettin'. I remember what it feels like to be a field slave. Massa worked us from when we can't see in the mornin' to when we can't see at night. I respects my people too much to strut about like the shade of the big house makes me worth more than them."

"Is that why you settled in Mud Run rather than sleep here on the trundle bed, as you did when you first came to Hillcrest?"

"It's best fo' me to live in the quarters 'cuz it's where I belong. There is mighty fine things up here on the hill, especially the soft heart beatin' right here in front o' me, but *my* life ain't in the big house. No matter how much affection you heap on me when nobody is lookin', I's still jes' an outsider."

"After all this time, how can you feel like an outsider with me? I declare, Livie, when you say such things, it makes me think I don't know you at all."

"Now, don't get a sulk on, Hannah." She nudged playfully. "After today, I expect you'll know me a whole lot better."

I finally made it down to the kitchen after Livie suggested I change from my rose flounced dress into something less standoffish. So I redressed in my favorite garibaldi skirt and cotton blouse given to me by Colt the previous Christmas. Aunt Augusta forbade me to wear it, citing poor taste. On the handful of occasions her absence allowed me to pull it from the back of my wardrobe closet, I relished seeing a modestly attractive woman, shed of inhibitions, reflected back at me from my looking glass.

In the kitchen, Esther Mae had a cup of hot tea and a dish of bread pudding for me on the table. I seldom instructed my meals to be served in the dining room when Aunt August was away, unless, of course, Colt or Uncle Mooney joined me. She greeted me in a detached tone as she gazed out the window. "Granny's gone down over de hill. I can fry you up some ham and griddle cakes, if it suits you."

“The bread pudding will do, Esther Mae,” I said, settling across the table from Livie. “You can go join the others if you like.”

Esther Mae’s forlorn expression turned to me. “Chile, Miz ’Gusta gave me strict orders to stay here and watch over you mornin’, noon, and night. Ain’t gonna be no shuckin’ time fo’ me.”

Disappointment and sorrow dripped in Esther Mae’s words and gave me my first enlightened glimpse at the separateness Livie mentioned with regard to the house slaves. Winston and Elijah were down with the Runians, while Esther Mae could only watch from afar.

I lifted the kettle to warm my tea. “Go be with your family, Esther Mae. I am fine here on my own.”

“Don’t talk crazy, Miz Hannah. You is sick and need lookin’ after. Now, let me fill yo’ cup proper.” I gently intercepted Esther Mae’s hand as it reached for the kettle and I held it in mine. She flinched at my touch and stepped back in embarrassment.

“I am not sick, Esther Mae, and I see no need for you to guard over me like a mama bear.”

“What’chu mean you ain’t sick? Miz ’Gusta says . . .”

“Aunt Augusta believes I am not well, but she is mistaken. I feel splendid.”

“But Miz ’Gusta told me . . .”

“Don’t be concerned about Aunt Augusta. She is not here and will know nothing of it. Now abide by my wish for you to join in the activity below.”

Esther Mae’s lips parted, although nothing but befuddled silence came of it. She shifted slowly, like she was waiting for something to drop from the ceiling and knock some sense into me. Leaning wide, she looked to Livie in blank wonder. When Livie giggled and shook her head with assurance, Esther Mae let out a whoop and tossed her apron into the air.

“Miz Hannah, the two of you is crazier than a couple of headless guinea hens fresh off the choppin’ block. But a notion meant for the good of a colored only comes along about as often as a star fallin’ from the sky, so I’s not gonna let this one pass by without grabbin’ on.” Esther Mae hustled out the back door. “Livetta, come help me carry these molasses jars down yonder. We gonna have fine times after all!”

The congregation of slaves from the two plantations combined with slaves given passes from the Garrett and Fredrickson plantations to our

south. Three wagons rolled in from Echo Ridge, bringing a small group of slaves owned or hired by townsmen. Voices rose from the wagons as they neared. The spirituals they sang joined with words chanted by those walking to greet them. I had never witnessed a gathering of coloreds without a white presence standing watch.

In spite of the December chill, the afternoon sunshine warmed me as I moved from the front porch and moseyed across the front yard. I paused nonchalantly by the fence to steal a closer look. As the last of the wagons pulled in, the dark faces came to life and shed the sallow hardness earned in the fields. Granny Morgan's hearty laughter rose above all as Winston helped Mabelle, Granny's beloved sister, off the buckboard. The reunited sisters walked arm in arm to the cook fires, where benches and bales of hay formed a makeshift sitting area. Women of all ages talked and sang while ears of corn were shucked clean, put in baskets, and dumped into ox carts to be cribbed. The group was divided into teams and began cheering a race to see whose baskets emptied first. Granny and Mabelle sat together amid the commotion, twisting discarded husks into brooms and horse collars. I don't recall ever seeing Granny's face so soft with pleasure.

As the day's shadows grew long, a row of wooden planks were lined across the damp mud of the lowland, inviting scattered dancers into a closer circle. Rhythmic and entrancing, their movements acted out the words of songs I occasionally heard from the fields or chanted back and forth in town. The spirituals, which usually dripped with heart-wrenching despair, were now sung as a chorus of earnest confession and promise, as though they were speaking to God in a language all their own.

Livie waved to me from beneath a large basket balanced skillfully on her head. I waved back, and once the basket was emptied, she handed it off to one of Mr. Richardson's mulatto girls and dashed up the hillside toward me.

"Didn't 'spect to be gone so long," she said, swatting away some of the corn dust speckled down the front of her wool frock. "Jes' wanted to do my part before comin' to fetch you."

"Fetch me?"

She reached for my hand. "If you want to know me, right and complete, then you gots'ta see me outside the big house." Her cool hand was cracked and smudged with blood. A torn blister swelled the inside pad of her thumb, but Livie paid it no mind. She clenched my hand and tugged me toward her.

“I can see fine from here, Livie. Go on and have your fun.”

“Fun? Does this look like fun?” she mused, holding up her other palm, which was tightly wrapped in a soiled rag to protect its raw, reddened paleness.

“But you all look so happy.”

“Shuckin’ day is a time fo’ doin’ Massa’s work our own way, without no overseer or headmen drivin’ and lashin’ at us with whips. What you see ain’t fun, it’s jes’ us folk makin’ best of the bad. We ain’t ever given no better than that. At the end o’ the day, it still be Massa’s work. The shuckin’ feast don’t change that none.”

“All the more reason for me not to . . .” I sputtered, my fumbling tongue exposing my nervousness. “Not to intrude.”

“Can’t see how you could be intrudin’ when the land beneath our feet is yorn.”

“What I mean is, I imagine the Runians would think me out of place wandering among them.”

Livie’s left eyebrow arched halfway up her forehead. “No more out o’ place than I feel every day up at the big house.” Slowly, her face slacked with resigned acceptance, which troubled me, because my attempt at explanation had left her with the wrong impression. My hesitation was not the result of distaste, but rather from unmitigated fear. Uncle Mooney often professed that the slave population as a whole could not be trusted, and any one of them would slice the throat of a white man, woman, or child if given the chance. For the most part, I dismissed Uncle Mooney’s rants as peacockish sermons fueled by his indulgence in apple brandy, but to my dismay, the impact of those absorbed opinions weakened my knees. Livie lowered her head, fingering the sores on her hands and perhaps wondering if we had uprooted differences we could not ignore. She kept her eyes from mine, releasing me from any challenge or disappointment she could not mask. It shamed me as I faced the hurt feelings of a dear friend. Even worse, Livie’s posture shifted as though she were a conforming slave girl stepping back in obedience. With that, I cast off my unfounded fears and moved quickly to repair the damage caused by my hesitation.

“Thank you for inviting me today,” I said, slipping my arm around Livie’s elbow and nudging her with apologetic tenderness. “It means the world to me—really. Please forgive my nervousness. I truly did not mean to

imply mistrust. Sometimes the unknown is a bit scary, and to be truthful, I am not sure the Runians even like me. I guess it never occurred to me until this moment."

"I understand bein' scared of what you don't know, Hannah. Remember how jittery I was up in the ol' cave when Marcus tol' me he was leavin' me behind? But you stood by me and made sure no bad came to me. It was hard at first, but I growed to trust you. So don't be scared none, even if you get to feelin' peculiar with some folk. I won't let no harm come to you. Do you trust me?"

"You are my friend, Livie. Of course I trust you," I declared proudly, and prayed that my sincere conviction made amends for my earlier lapse.

I linked my arm in hers and let her lead me down the hill, away from Hillcrest and into a world I knew only from afar, framed like an oil painting in my bedroom window. As we stepped through the first line of trees that bordered Mud Run, my eyes and ears were awash with activities and sounds so rich, the portrait I held jumped from its canvas and burst alive.

Each clapboard cabin I passed stood bare and simple, with a modest stack of firewood and a mildew-stained rain barrel. The slaves moved with an ease of step I was not accustomed to seeing, and no doubt came from being beyond the watch and demand pressed on them by their overseers. They talked and joked with one another as they went about their business, their voices warm and lyrical. The scent of smoked venison flavored the air as women in aprons filled with carrots and potatoes bustled by in pairs toward the large cook fires crackling in the clearing. Between the two cabins nearest us, a handful of pickaninnies in worn, ill-fitting shirttails crouched in a circle, playing with marbles and wooden pegs.

"Lawd have mercy, Miz Hannah, what'chu doin' down this way?" Winston said, pushing a wheelbarrow piled with split logs "Livetta, you get her on back up the hill now, ya hear? This ain't no rightful place fo' Miz Hannah."

"I am here of my own choosing, Winston."

Winston settled the wheelbarrow on the ground, then reached up under the back of his felt hat to scratch his head. He gave me an amused wink from under the brim of his hat. Some may have thought it an inappropriate gesture, but I knew it was Winston's amiable way of sealing the secret

between us. He readjusted his hat and hoisted the barrow back onto its wooden wheel.

“Well, that’s a whole ’nother story den, Miz Hannah.” As he heaved his load back in motion and headed for the gathering by the fires, Winston shook his head and chuckled. “Don’t that beat all. Somewhere, Miz ’Gusta is pitchin’ a big ol’ fit, none the wiser that her fussin’ is seeded and sprinkled right here in Mud Run.”

I was not offended by his forthright humor, because I could indeed picture Aunt Augusta bristling with agitation brought on by instinctive awareness of something, somewhere being out of order. I was quite grateful the group surrounding me had as much reason as I to keep Aunt Augusta in the dark about my journey below. And so began another day in the year of my awakening.

Livie took hold of my wrist and led me to where the fires roared. The sea of dark faces parted to let us pass. Some nodded respectfully, while others turned away, not wanting to engage me. Puzzled stares came at me from every direction, and if not for Livie’s firm grip on my arm, I would have turned on my heels and retreated from the whispered exchanges passing from one to the other. I held a delicate smile on my face so tightly, it felt branded in place. Any superior air I may have carried at other times surely dissipated as I lowered my head self-consciously.

Still, Livie tugged me along, undeterred by the dampened effect my appearance had on the mumbling crowd. My heart lightened when we came upon the Runians with whom I was better acquainted.

“Good afternoon, Esther Mae.” I lit up as she paused with an apron piled heavy with corncobs.

“Land sakes, Miz Hannah! Do you need somethin’ up at the big house? I’ll fetch it fo’ you rightly.”

“No, thank you kindly, Esther Mae. I was simply drawn to the music. I come with no directives or expectations.”

She cocked her head in doubt, then relaxed into a smile. “Jes’ when I thinks I seen it all, the two of you show up here.” Esther Mae looked at me in a way she never had: warmly and directly in the eye. Her gracious nod revealed an earnest soul who harbored no ill will. Holding tight to her load, she made a broad stroke with her free hand. “Well, then, Miz Hannah, welcome to the Run.” Esther Mae’s acceptance seemed to signal the others

to accept, or at least tolerate, me as well. As she joined the shuckers sitting on the haystacks, a sigh of relief was breathed by all.

Old Joe, one of Uncle Mooney's hog slaughterers, resumed his tune on the gourd fiddle, coaxing the revelry back into the crisp December air. Before long, a few of the young girls broke from their labor and took to the dance floor with rhythmic stomping that had me clapping along with the crowd.

"There!" Livie shouted over the music. She pointed over to the hay bales where Granny Morgan waved us over. The bales were lined and layered like choir benches along the south side of the blacksmith quarters. It was a building unseen from my window, with the exception of its wood-shingled roof, and it stood nearly as large as the carriage house. James emerged from the side entrance with a lasso looped over his broad shoulder. As he walked past us, he tugged the brim of his hat and nodded, first to me, then to Livie. Her eyes instantly gleamed with pleasure.

"Ain't he a fine sight?" she oozed as she watched him walk off through the crowd. "Folks down here think he's a mite peculiar, 'cuz he's so quiet and inside hisself."

"My, my, Livie," I said, playfully. "From your deepening hue, I can see you have a warm opinion of silent James."

Livie giggled and shrugged her shoulders. However, the smile on her face was not that of a childlike crush, but rather the reflection of a vulnerable woman's heart. I envied the amorous swirl in her eyes, which so sharply contrasted with the vacant eyes of my counterparts who existed in marriages arranged like business deals struck long before their hearts could awaken with love.

"Come over here, young'uns, so you ain't trampled." Granny Morgan greeted us like a mother hen corralling her chicks. She patted the stacked bales of hay, signaling us to sit.

Mabelle swayed and hummed as the music gained momentum. Sensing our approach, she paused to echo Granny's declaration. "Tuck yo'self in behind Granny. Best place fo' stayin' warm and out o' the way."

Mabelle's pocked eyes rolled back and forth as she reached her hands out and groped the air. "Is this here the Blessin' girl I hear tell of ?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, stepping toward her to let her hands find mine.

Her plump fingers squeezed my hands and pulled me nearer. “The good Lawd give you a fittin’ name, chile. Jes’ like yo’ mama and papa.”

Her words took me off guard, because in all of my time at Hillcrest, no one with the exception of Aunt Augusta ever spoke of my parents. “Miss Mabelle, did you know my mother and father?”

“Of course, chile, we all—”

Granny Morgan laid a firm hand on her sister’s arm. “Hush up now, Mabelle. An ol’ soul with hair as white as yorn don’t recollect proper or know nothin’ ’bout nothin’. Ain’t that right, ol’ gal?”

Granny patted Mabelle’s hand in a way that delivered a message that transcended her words. Mabelle released my hands and receded back into her own world, humming and swaying to the spirituals. Livie grabbed an armful of corn and nudged me up on the hay, where we settled behind Granny Morgan. Tucked away in this makeshift balcony, I found discreet respite, although the mournful strains of Mabelle’s serenade tugged at my heart. Countless times in the past, I had heard her sing when she sat on the stoop of the mercantile. Melodies filled with random tales and meaningless words seemed designed to fill the emptiness of a day. But somehow they cut deep in me now and released a dormant ache. Thankfully, the laughter and fiddle music around us pulled me from my stupor.

Any doubt I had about coming down into Mud Run was replaced with curiosity about the people who lived behind the abiding, complacent faces that moved through my life, barely noticed. As the shadows spread into twilight and most of the corn was cribbed, the fires grew into excited infernos. The blazing halo gave light to the twisting and turning pairs immersed in musical escape and contentment. Smaller cook fires produced a stream of sweet potatoes and turnip greens for anyone seeking to fill their wooden bowls. Eventually, Livie and I left the balcony and mixed among the revelers as they ate and clapped in unison. Occasionally, though, Mabelle’s voice rose above the others and had me wondering what she knew of my mother and father. And why was it being hidden from me?

Chapter 13

Sweeping tentacles of fire whooshed high into the midnight sky as the mountain of harvested corn was leveled, shucked, and cribbed. Six crates of jugged corn whiskey, a limited allowance offered by Uncle Mooney, were now empty. The enthusiasm of the inebriated pushed the music and carousing into a feverish uproar. The blend of fiddles, mouth organs, and banjos shook my heart free of the social corset in which I had been dutifully bound. I stepped in tune and clapped my hands, discreetly at first, then with complete abandon as Elijah's small, rough hands held mine and bounced me in a circular two-step. I laughed shamelessly as my skirt whirled above my exposed ankles, until I finally reached down with one hand and hoisted my hemline halfway up my calf so I could move without restriction.

Swept up in my unguarded enthusiasm, I lost sight of Livie, who had remained faithfully at my side throughout the night. As I turned around the dance floor with Elijah, I caught a glimpse of Livie leaning against the corner of the blacksmith barn. Next to her, James straddled an overturned rain barrel, keeping his usual quiet distance outside the circle of activity. Livie shifted shyly as she spoke to him, her dewy eyes soft with warmth and sweetness. James hunched forward, delicately working his small carving knife up and down a smooth piece of cherrywood as a slow tumble of wood shavings fell around his feet. Livie's face radiated as she spoke with him. He stood and brushed his trousers clean of wood dust, then removed his hat, holding it awkwardly in his thick hands. Words passed from him to her. Livie responded with shining eyes. Then, to my surprise, James' terminally solemn face melted into an engaging grin accentuated by a timid nod inviting Livie to join him. Livie floated to his side and as they settled onto the barrel together, he pressed a gentle hand against the small of her back. They were the picture of contentment embraced by the bright aura of fire. And though it went unnoticed by most, or perhaps dismissed as nothing more than the flicker of firelight, I recognized the spark of infatuation when I saw it.

"Does yo' feet need to rest a spell, Miz Hannah?"

I looked down into Elijah's cocoa bean eyes and realized I had stopped dancing. My heart skipped with excitement from my exertions of the evening. Elijah's angelic face lit up with a smile, unaware of the powerful impact his acceptance of me had within the circle of Runians. His innocent gesture of bringing me onto the dance floor had given me a gateway into their lives. Gone were the sedated bows and curtsies that hung like a curtain between their world and mine. The absolute real-ness of the night dizzied me, and for a fleeting moment, I wished the music would never end.

"Do you want me to fetch you some cider, Miz Hannah?"

Elijah's words were punctuated by the fiddle bow stroking a quick and unexpected end to the delightful jig. As the musicians set aside their instruments to wipe their brows, the crowd continued stomping and singing, their spontaneous momentum never waning. But I savored a momentum all my own. I tucked my fingers beneath Elijah's chin and raised it in a playful yet sincerely felt gesture of gratitude.

"Thank you for the lovely dance, Mr. Elijah," I said with a delicate bow of the head and curtsy. "It was truly my honor to have such a fine partner, but I do not wish to be utterly selfish by keeping you all to myself when there are so many other pretty girls waiting to share your time. I shall go over and dip my own cider while you run off and have some fun."

Elijah beamed a satisfied smile as he turned on his heels and strolled away toward a group of giggling girls, his chin still high in the air. I walked my tired feet across the dance floor to where a gaggle of women, some young, some old, whispered around the cider barrel. A tall, lanky Runian named Isabel dipped a hollow gourd in the cider barrel and handed it to me as I approached. Isabel worked in the fields, so I did not know her well, but I smiled as I accepted the tart cider from her. As I sipped the cool refreshment, she watched my movement with a perplexed gaze.

The crowd thinned as the gray predawn sky brought with it drowsy completeness. Light snow began falling tranquil and silent, a fitting end to a celestial evening. Many of the older Runians who had nodded off during the night now shuffled with stiff, labored steps to the cabins hidden in the shadows. An intimate group of coupled pairs, including Livie and James, swayed to the strains of a lone fiddler, serenading them with a waltz so tender it was impossible for courtship not to be set in motion.

The smile I held from afar drained my last bit of vigor and with it my ability to hold open my heavy eyelids, which bobbed and sagged with exhaustion. Unwilling to face the gloomy trek back up the hill, where isolation and loneliness would be my only companions, I decided to seek respite in Livie's cabin at the far edge of Mud Run. I slipped through the shadows that laced the path between the huddled cabins. If not for the remnant of moonlight still fighting the dawn, I would have stumbled over rocks and tree stumps hidden along the way. Still, the gray mist enveloped me, and I became disoriented and led astray. A hoot owl mocked my ignorance from above. I paused to regain my bearings, but was assaulted by the dank stench of rat droppings and chicken manure, a bleak reminder of the harsh and desperate conditions within Mud Run.

Without warning, a rough, clammy hand latched on to my wrist. I shrieked, and when my frantic eyes found blank eyes staring at me through the mist, my body erupted into molten fear. I twisted my hand to break free, but could not release it. The eyes moved toward me, shedding the haze between us, and revealed the weathered outline of one of Uncle Mooney's ragged slave women, who was nameless to me. She was a tall, meatless woman with one hand gnarled into a claw. Her infirmity was the result of a suffocating August day several years earlier, when heat and lack of water had collapsed her in the fields. Now she earned her keep by looking after the children left motherless during the day when the able-bodied women worked the fields.

The strength brought on by a lifetime of labor flowed powerfully from her good hand, still clutching my wrist. Her mouth, which hung as crippled as her claw, garbled a few low groans with no meaningful form. Using her claw, she gestured gruffly up through the trees. Shrouded by a thin veil of tumbling snowflakes, the gray outline of Hillcrest stood lifeless in the distance. I shook my head.

"No, I do not seek the path up the hill. I am trying to find my way to Livetta's cabin."

She cocked her head and moaned with disapproval. Poking twice more toward Hillcrest, the woman let the grossly bent angle of her wrist punctuate her insistence that I leave Mud Run. By now the rug-thumping fright eased in my heart and in its place came steady resolve.

“Old woman, I know you mean well, but I insist you direct me toward Livetta’s cabin.”

With a resigned grimace wrinkling the side of her face not robbed of expression, the woman released my wrist and shuffled like a broken pinwheel in a strained half circle. She pointed down a narrow trail beyond the dull gleam of candlelight illuminating the cabins nearest us. She turned back to me long enough to mumble something befitting a stern warning, then scuffed away until all I could hear of her was the sound of her dragging leg.

I hurried among the cabins, some silent and others with the soft hum of songs meant to coax sleep. The path darkened beneath a line of hickories, then opened into what I recognized as the nearest cabin cluster to the upper fields. Livie’s cabin was the last one along the back edge, and the only one of the cluster with the faint glow of firelight leaking from its door frame. Even though I had never stepped inside its log walls, I ran toward her home like it was my safe haven

I creaked open the door and was met by the scents of damp leather, straw, and earthy simplicity. Orange embers dozed near dormancy in the stone fireplace of a hazy room. A small table with benches centered the room, and two cast-iron pots hung from pegs above the hearth. Near the smoldering ash sat a wooden bucket with a small ring of water puddling at its base. There were two modest bed frames huddled against opposite walls. Each held a straw mattress draped with a lump of frayed blankets and one fairly sturdy quilt. The bedding struck me as inadequate, considering the limited warmth put forth by the meager ashes that gasped for life from across the room.

Without warning, one of the lumps bolted up. I reeled backward against the door, and would have screamed if the force of the collision had not knocked the breath from my lungs. The ebony reflection of my surprise stared out at me from beneath her blanket. I had forgotten Livie shared her cabin with another slave girl who had not yet been matched for breeding. I recognized Fatima from our time together in the sewing room.

“Excuse me,” I said with awkward embarrassment. “I did not mean to wake you.”

Realizing I wanted nothing from her, Fatima burrowed back under her covers. I was now dizzy with exhaustion, so without further consideration

of my surroundings, I folded my weary body onto the empty bed nearest the fireplace. The straw mattress was stiff and prickly, making me long for the crisp linen sheets and thick, warm quilt tucked neatly over my feathered mattress. However, in spite of my dependency on the fine comforts accompanying wealth, I was not yet prepared to let go of my day of immunity from pretense and distinction. Shucking day awoke new understanding in me, and left me as raw as the harvest. Much like the stripped corn prepared for the coming winter, I too was made ready for new purpose by the hardened hands of the oppressed. Wrapped in a tattered quilt and with the lilt of Mabelle's mournful songs beckoning me, I sank into sleep.

"Wake up, Hannah! He's here! I seen him."

Livie jerked me to my feet and shook me until the fog cleared from my groggy head. Through the dimness of dawn, I saw Livie's wide eyes snapping against her strained face. My heart jolted to life as I realized I was still in her cabin.

"Has Twitch returned with Aunt Augusta?" I lurched, pulling the door ajar. "She must not find me here, Livie."

"No, no . . ." Livie had me by the sleeve and pulled me into the bite of a cold morning.

I fought against her, but her strength had me stumbling along after her. A thin crust of frosty snow crunched beneath our feet as she tugged me across the back edge of Mud Run. Before we broke through the last line of trees, I grabbed the branch of an azalea bush as an anchor and brought us to a sudden halt. Our breath churned rolls of mist through the icy air between us.

"Livie, this is serious. I shall be of no use to you if Aunt Augusta sends me away. If she finds me here, she will disown me and banish me from the plantation. What's more, no matter how cruel my fate, you and the others will bear worse. Aunt Augusta will take great pleasure in levying punishment on all of you. It will be swift and merciless, because she will see this as the worst kind of betrayal."

"No, Hannah," Livie panted. "Miz 'Gusta ain't home." Urgency sparked from her fingertips as she took my hand and dragged me to where the trees opened into the upper fields. "I seen him up yonder."

"What are you talking about, Livie? Who did you see?"

“Marcus,” she squealed. “Marcus came back, jes’ like he said he would. James and me was behind the tobacc’y barn, and I caught a glimpse of someone runnin’ through the trees up there. James said I was plumb crazy ’cuz he didn’t see nothin’. But I took off, ’cuz I knowed what I seen.”

“Are you certain it was Marcus? There were lots of folks wandering around last night.”

“I know the difference ’tween wanderin’ and runnin’,” she shot back, tight with frustration. “If you think I’m crazy like James says, then I’ll go off and find him by myself.”

I reached out and gripped her shoulders in steady loyalty. “I do not think you are crazy, Liv. Show me where you saw him.”

I followed in the direction Livie pointed. We raced to the upper edge of the field where two large boulders called Castle Rock were wedged at an angle against each other. A knotted pine, wounded by years of winter gales, twisted from behind the rocks and slouched over them like a thatched roof. The heavy lid of daybreak had not yet blinked entirely open, but there was no mistaking the sudden whisking movement within the gray shadows of the formation as we approached. Livie exploded by me, no doubt seeing the illusive figure ducking from sight.

Excitement drove my feet against the back of Livie’s heels, matching her step for step. My heart took an unexpected leap. *Is it possible? Is Marcus there in the shadows?*

There was no time to reflect or wonder. When our feet brought us within an apple toss of the rock, the figure shot from the hovel and sprinted back through the trees where the mountain’s slow rise weighted our legs.

“Marcus! Oh, Marcus!” Livie called in a hushed voice.

The dark figure did not respond but stumbled in one direction, then another. The morning mist hung low on the snow-kissed fauna. Its weightlessness swirled beneath our footsteps as we sliced nearer to him. It seemed our familiarity with the terrain gave us the advantage, until we closed the gap enough to realize the figure was hobbled and exhausted. My heart stuttered with disappointment.

“Marcus, don’t run off. It’s me, Livetta!”

Livie’s emotion must have clouded her vision, because it was clear to me the figure we were chasing was not Marcus. The man in the woods was shirtless, with torn, frayed trousers barely clinging to his shrunken hips.

Even with his back to me and his skin as dark as a scorched chestnut, I recognized the cut of his shoulders was not as broad as the powerful image of Marcus emblazoned in my mind. He was not as tall and the marks on his back were fresh and pocked with sores. The man slipped on the frosty dew and sprawled against the base of a weeping willow. He dragged himself within reach of a willow branch that dangled close to the ground and hoisted himself upright.

"You ain't . . ." Livie gasped. "Who you be?" She choked back tears and sought no answer for her question. Livie wilted when struck with the realization that Marcus had not come back.

With a grunt, the wayward slave bolted from us. Within a dozen steps, he was snared in a bramble patch. The thorny claws clung to him like a posse securing its bounty. The harder he struggled to free himself, the tighter it harnessed him, nipping his skin from his elbows to his shoeless feet, which were cracked and bleeding of their own accord. Dry blood caked from one ear and beneath both of his nostrils. He shrank as far away from us as the clutching thorns allowed. He convulsed with anticipation, of what I'm not sure, but our hesitation calmed his struggle. The fact we were not armed or calling for help seemed to nudge his terror toward desperate hope. He whispered hoarsely through parched, flaking lips.

"I jes' want to get back home to ol' Kentuck. 'Taint gonna die here wit' nobody knowin' what become of ol' Hobey. Massa George been good to me and mine. My woman is prob'ly heartbroke, thinkin' I left her and the chilluns behind. I jes' wanna go home."

Livie stood limp and detached, as though she hadn't heard a word he said. I considered him carefully as he shivered for mercy in the brambles. He was in a bad way and a stranger to me, but I saw Winston in him, and the image of how pained Esther Mae and Elijah had been after Winston had been whipped in town by Twitch. I thought of stoic James, hollowed by the loss of his family, and poor Livie still mourning the separation from her brother. Like them, the figure pleading from the bushes was no longer a slave to me, but simply a man who wanted to reunite with his family. I hurried over and yanked at the branches until the sharp spurs released. The man burst from his prickly cage and never turned back. I started to call out, but realized silence was his greatest asset. And as the first blades of sunshine lanced the gray mist around us, the mysterious man disappeared

into the trees. Livie's hope of seeing Marcus ebbed in the wake of the runaway. I went to her and gathered her in my arms. Livie sobbed in my embrace, and as my tears joined with hers, a painful ache stirred within me. The depth of my sorrow was not only for my heartbroken friend, but also for me. As much as I loved Livie and she loved me, I understood for the first time that she was not mine to keep.

Chapter 14

*W*hen I tucked Livie into bed, she did not utter a word. She curled among her quilts with her eyes open but focused on nothing. The chill of the cabin seeped through me as I sat on a chair next to her bed. Silence hung heavy in the room until Livie was lulled to sleep by the distant crack of an ax. The lonely caw of a crow echoed through the trees, beckoning the new day. Two voices, then another rose with the sun as Mud Run began to stir with the morning birds. Exhaustion weighted my eyes until I could no longer will them wide and awake. My head bobbed its last resistance before drooping into sleep.

I floated deeper into unconsciousness, casting my fears and worries into the abyss when suddenly my eyes were pulled open by the creak of the cabin door.

“ ’Scuse me, Miz Hannah,” James mumbled in a low, throaty voice. “Jes’ checkin’ on Livetta. She run off in a tizzy last night.”

“Come in, James,” I said, standing to meet half his height. His size alone made him commanding, but it was offset by the gentleness in his voice and the concern in his eyes. “Livie has suffered a great disappointment,” I continued. “She has finally given in to sleep; however, I am very worried about her.”

James nodded, then stepped closer to take in the sight of Livie limp beneath her covers. Uncle Mooney often said James was built for work, with his fry-pan hands powerful and skilled for the farrier duties required between the two plantations. However, shed of his hammer and anvil, James looked as shaken and vulnerable as Livie. He shifted with uncertainty on callused feet that bulged through the seams of his boots. Rawhide strips were wound strategically around his peeling soles to hold them together and mark an unsightly measure of a year’s worth of sweat and toil.

“Shouldn’t have stripped her of hopeful notions, the way I did last night. It’s the one rightly thing we got fo’ ourselves,” James said more to himself

than to me. He pulled his eyes from Livie and added, “No disrespect, Miz Hannah.”

I nodded to assure him he could speak freely without fear of repercussions. And truth be told, I was drawn by the curiosity of not ever having heard James utter an entire sentence before. I saw him as stoic and driven, not much different from a plow horse with blinders in place, plodding from task to task. He usually appeared removed and uninterested in all else but the next chore at hand. Now I was fascinated by James and the ease with which he displayed his sincere attachment and tender concern.

“I knowed it couldn’t be the brother she is always goin’ on about. Chances of him gettin’ north ain’t likely, but thinkin’ he could make it back down here, even if he had a mind to, is jes’ plain fool-hearted. But holdin’ out hope fo’ him sure do light her up bright as a beacon.”

I was surprised when James wasn’t more guarded in his thoughts. Obviously, he had some awareness of the relationship Livie and I shared. It was a relief, because it released me from the cautious veil I had worn for nearly a year.

“Since the day he left her, Livie has been steadfast in her wish for his return,” I confided aloud for the first time.

“When you got no hope nor wishes left, yo’ heart goes to stone,” James whispered. “Livetta says I is strong as a grizzly bear ’cuz o’ the mighty boulder I carry inside me since my family was sold off by the marse who owned me befo’ Massa Reynolds. Truth is, last night with Livetta, I felt my heart a-beatin’ fo’ the first time in a long spell. Made me remember what wishful thinkin’ can do fo’ a lonely soul. Don’t want nothin’ or nobody takin’ that from her. A heart o’ stone is a heavy burden to carry.”

Tears burned like hot puddles in my eyes. The beauty of raw, uninhibited affection was nonexistent in my world, and watching it flow so easily and naturally from James to Livie opened a door in me. He was a man whose heart ached for the woman he loved. We were bonded by the ache we shared, and I felt sameness rather than difference.

“Would you like to sit with her awhile, James?”

He settled onto the chair I offered. “I’m much obliged.”

“I must attend to some things but did not want to leave Livie alone.”

James nodded up at me from his chair, allowing a quick acknowledgment of mutual trust and respect. When I stepped from the cabin into the bright

sunshine of a clear new day, a nagging question swirled in my fatigued mind. *Who was the downtrodden slave that ran through the night, not to escape, but rather to return to his master? Who was he running from?* And though my body begged for sleep, I lifted my skirt and trudged to the upper field with hope that the receding chill of morning did not take with it the answer I sought. Alone in my quest, I wished Colt was home and not so long away.

The morning mist lifted while most of Mud Run slept away the fatigue of their nightlong revelry. The lonely coo of a mourning dove halted when the echo of someone chopping wood began again. It was the same axman I heard earlier, and could now pinpoint somewhere within the fog-shrouded hillside of West Gate. But as I walked the field, the crunch of the crisp snow beneath my feet was the only sound of interest to me. The secret held by the snowy ground cover would not linger in the presence of the rising sun, so I retraced the footprints Livie and I left behind earlier, slicing the center of the upper field with a crescent frown.

I slowed my walk at the tree line, where our stampede of footprints trampled the frosty coating. The bloody outline of bare feet stood out from the others. A cool breeze trickled down the mountainside and twirled a strip of torn trouser snagged within the brambles. I plucked the cloth from the thorns and held it as gently as I would a silk ribbon. Its coarse surface was stained with salty, dry sweat and spilled blood. The diverging white and dark residue melded together in the runaway's struggle.

I dismissed the thought of following the path up the mountainside. The sunrise in the east would orient the errant slave and redirect him back toward the plantation he sought in Kentucky.

I looked over my shoulder from where the footsteps appeared. The line staggered its way to the far edge of the field, where it dipped out of sight toward West Gate. I scampered along the bloodstained path, hoping to find its origin before the whole of the plantation awakened. The ground had already begun drinking in the rusty prints, leaving them barely recognizable by the time I reached the small, rocky ravine that tumbled into the backside of West Gate. I froze at the sight of Twitch's plot of land a short climb below me. The pen of fiendish hounds reeked of musk and manure. Although only ten in number, the dogs slept with the edginess of a restless mob. Ankle- deep holes pocked the ground along the base of the chicken

wire as proof of their urgency to run wild. I was certain if I did not calm my surging emotion, the perceptive hounds would spring to life at any moment.

The dawning day stopped and held its breath with me. With Twitch away, the back lot was eerily silent. Even the pop of the axman halted, leaving dead air pressing from all sides. My eyes were drawn to the two outbuildings that stood between the carriage house and the pen. The smaller of the two structures had a cracked shovel and two broken tobacco machetes propped against its open door. From what I could see, it was not as much a toolshed as it was an arsenal for punishment. Several sets of leg irons hung from a peg on the backside of the door. More chains and a neck collar were strewn across the floor. Several whips, including a cat-o'-nine-tails, lay draped over a table. All were devices I had seen hundreds of times, but with the warmth and laughter of the previous night still pulsating through me, the sight of these tools sent a chill through me.

The second building was grossly deteriorated, with its frame buckled to one side. If not for a row of bowed planks wedged strategically against its lopsided weight, it would have collapsed into a pile of splinters and dust. Its thick tar roof was cracked and peeling; the result of extreme seasons of hot and cold. The crooked building was peculiar because it had no windows. Similar to the top of a corncrib, it had two narrow slots along the roof line at each end for drafting. The door, however, stood strong, with an extra plank nailed securely to its base to close the gap created by the lopsided skeleton. The lone impressive feature of the building was the large padlock clamped to its hinge, displayed like a badge of honor on the lapel of a war-proven commandeer.

Near the corner of the structure, there was a ditch dug like those in the dog pen, the soil dark and loose as though newborn. I considered the hole more carefully, struck by the odd sense of something amiss. The thought catapulted from my mind when the sound of boots made me duck for cover. Rounding the far corner of the carriage house, Willy Jack appeared with a pile of split logs loaded in his arms. I dove into the brittle grass with only a knee-high line of rocks to conceal me. Willy Jack came only as far as the back corner of Uncle Mooney's carriage house. He struggled down onto one knee, then let the logs tumble from his arms. After taking a moment to restack the logs into a neat pile, the fierce slave driver stood and turned back in my direction, brushing his hands together to clear the dust. I pressed

my body tighter against the cold ground and rested my cheek on a smooth rock. I held my breath as I watched him through a sliver between two adjoining rocks. He turned away; then as if he smelled fear in the air, Willy Jack stepped back in my direction. His boots crunched the stony earth in a deliberate march toward the slope dropping from the field where I lay. He closed the distance between us by half before stopping to puzzle over the horizon behind me.

My heart screamed with terror. Each thrust in my chest seemed to lift me from the ground in an effort to betray my presence. Willy Jack was close enough for me to see the dark layer of whiskers that spiraled tight against his mahogany jawline, except where two long scars carved upward from his cheek and across the length of his ear, a savage gift delivered by one of the frenzied hounds he shepherded for Twitch. Willy Jack cocked his gnarled ear into the breeze. As he scanned what was left of the morning mist, he reached inside his ragged woolen jacket and pulled out a plug of tobacco. He pushed it deep inside his cheek and chomped with the snarl of a hungry wolf. Then, as if losing interest in the distraction, he shot a stream of spittle against the rocks below me. Willy Jack hoisted his ax back onto his shoulder and turned back in the direction he came.

I waited breathlessly, afraid to move until Willy Jack disappeared beyond the far side of the carriage house. I hedged to my knees and listened, my senses razor sharp. When I heard the knock of Willy Jack's ax resume amid the distant trees, I let go a tremulous breath. However, before my terror completely released, it caught in my throat and wound tight as a knot. Still on my knees, I leaned closer to the rock where I had just pressed my face for cover. There, imprinted on its smooth surface, was the clear, unmistakable outline of a bloodied foot. The path of blood trailed straight down the slope and disappeared into the small ditch clawed in the dirt at the corner of the crooked building. *How could it be? A runaway from West Gate? No slave ever slipped away from the plantation.*

The torn strip of cloth I had plucked from the brambles fluttered in my fingertips. When the escape was discovered, the hounds would be unleashed on the scent of the bloodied footprints. In my hand was the perfect bait for confusion. I ran to an azalea and broke loose its longest branch. Tying the cloth to the stick, I touched the tip on the footprint staining the rock, then ran back across the field, dragging the runaway's

scent against the ground to where the footprints met the brambles. I traced circles in the ground to ensure some scent was deposited, but instead of following where the now-melted footprints had turned up the hill, I made a new trail straight across the upper field and then down into the wooded acreage dropping to the river. I stumbled through the trees as if running for my own life, slowing only when I reached the swampy marsh that edged the river, north of the Horse's Bend. I scraped what was left of the shredded cloth back and forth in the moist ground to clear the imprint of my shoes so they would not betray my efforts. Then I flung the branch into the current and watched as it was swept into the bend.

Gathering my dress around my waist, I waded knee-deep into the chilly water and sloshed downstream, where I exited the river through a patch of cattail and marsh grass. The sights and sounds of the morning were lost amid my desperate breaths as I stumbled back through the trees toward Hillcrest. When I thought I could run no farther, the profile of the main house loomed on the crest above me. I ascended the cliff that bordered the back of the house, where I dropped to my knees, exhausted by the weight of my drenched clothing.

With one final burst, I pushed through the rear entrance of the kitchen. Once inside, I sank to the floor. After a late night of celebration and the reprieve of Aunt Augusta's absence, Granny Morgan had yet to warm the hearth. I stripped bare and scrubbed my clothes at the kitchen pump, then draped them over the table to dry. My naked body shivered as I made my way through the house and up the stairs. The scent of verbena welcomed me into the seclusion of my bedchamber. I pulled back the drapery on my front window and watched Winston lumber up the hill from Mud Run to the stable. It seemed I had lived and expired ten times since the last time I watched Mud Run come alive with the rise of morning, when in truth it had been only one day. My day spent in the slave quarters was certainly a day lived, steeped in good and bad, and far too full of activity and interaction for loneliness to take root.

I knelt next to my bed and whispered a prayer of thanks, and asked that safe passage be granted to the mysterious slave somewhere in the hills. I reached beneath the bed and pulled out Livie's small box of treasures. Along with her mother's Bible, she had several stones that held meaning for her, remembrances of her earlier life. A hair ribbon given to her by her

sister, and small figure Marcus had carved from darkened cherrywood. There was no detail of features, but Livie swore it was the image of Marcus. I could feel him there in the wood, warm and strong against my hand. I lay back across my bed and traced my finger along its curve.

Why did my heart leap with excitement when Livie claimed she had seen Marcus? Why did I still have his neckerchief, which had fallen from Livie's ankle before she entered the river, folded and hidden in my wardrobe closet?

Exhaustion and confusion made it impossible to sort out. As I drifted off to sleep, the yelping of dogs yanked me from the bed and across the room to the rear window. A line of hounds raced along the upper field from the direction of West Gate. Willy Jack ran in their wake, clutching a shotgun and chains. I held my breath when they reached the brambles and one dog shot up the hill toward the peak. The rest of the pack sniffed and bellowed in circles, then took off toward the river where I had laid the false trail. Willy Jack went after the one wayward hound and booted him back in the direction of the others. When the herd stampeded down over the hill into trees, the smug smile that released across my face reflected back at me in the window glass. Knowing this momentary reprieve would be brief, I crawled into bed and fell into a silent abyss.

Chapter 15

***"G**et on out the way, Miz Hannah," Esther Mae said, pulling the window drapes wide to bathe my room with the bright rays of a noontime sun. To my surprise, I still clutched Marcus's carving in my hand. Before Esther Mae took notice, I quickly shoved it beneath my pillow. I had slept half the day away, yet the haze of exhaustion hung around my head like a leaden halo. Esther Mae held the wet dress and stockings I had tossed on the kitchen table. I was tempted to offer false explanation, but believed anything short of the truth would have offended her. So I said nothing.

"We ain't accustomed to havin' you underfoot fo' cleanup, fix-up time. I gots'ta throw open these windows and hang out yo' bedding while the sun is high enough to take the bite from the air. Some o' the gals is gonna beat the dust out o' this here rug while I scrub down these walls with vinegar and water. Now, you best find a quiet corner in the sewin' room so you is out o' the way during the commotion. Only got a week or so befo' Miz 'Gusta gets back, and she be expectin' to find this house sparklin' by the start of Big Times. Dey be fetchin' the Yule log from the swamp any day now."

I was concerned that Livie was not here to wake me as was usual, but it had been a difficult night for her, and I suspected she needed time alone with her thoughts and disappointment. Esther Mae filled my washbasin and brought me my clothes without comment, so I decided to let it be for the moment. Downstairs, I found the kitchen so crowded with Runians that they spilled out into the backyard as far as the cookhouse. Baskets of apples and bags of brown sugar were lined up on the table as Granny Morgan, her face beaded with perspiration, stirred a bubbling pot of preserves. A line of Runians carried wooden boxes filled with jars and stacked them in the corner of the kitchen. I ducked out before Granny saw me, knowing the production would be halted so she could make me breakfast. Besides, my knotted stomach had no desire for a meal. I had expected the whole of West Gate and Mud Run to awaken to the wrath of Willy Jack desperate to find the runaway that eluded him during his early morning chase. He had less

than a fortnight until Twitch and Aunt Augusta returned. The chance of Willy Jack tracking the runaway would fade with each passing hour, and the status given to him as a slave driver would not protect him from paying a dear price at Twitch's discretion. Yet I was puzzled when there was no buzz of urgency in the air.

I tugged my shawl up over my shoulders when I stepped into the cool afternoon air. Winston distributed horsehair brushes and buckets of whitewash to a group of Runians under his watch. Suddenly, I realized why he had not driven Aunt Augusta on her journey. It was not a stroke of generosity on her part, meant for him to partake in the shucking celebration. Instead, she wanted him used in other duties during her absence. The respect given him by the other slaves kept them on task. How viciously clever, and a subtle example of why the men of power in the community regarded her as a peer.

"Miz Hannah," Winston said with a drawl as smooth as molasses. "The boys is gonna whitewash de porch and colonnades. If you is gonna sit here awhile, I'll send 'em off to start de fences out yonder."

He came to me, hat in hand, his gentleness unmarred by the smudges of whitewash speckling his face. I still could not look into his loyal eyes without feeling guilt for the whipping he endured as a result of his kindness toward me.

"That will not be necessary, Winston. I shall do my best to stay out of your way. Perhaps I will go down and visit with Livie. Have you seen her out and about?"

Winston scratched his chin as he ran his eyes from the lower fields, across the hills beyond Mud Run, and then back to me. "You should prob'ly wait on goin' down de hill, Miz Hannah. Massa Reynolds rode in from Kentuck early on this mornin'. Might be trouble fo' all of us if he sees you down there. If you don't mind an ol' fool like me thinkin' out loud to hisself, it might be best to let us folk look after Livetta fo' a spell. We know what she is feelin'. She is in de grip of de low-downs, and jes' like de rest of us, she gots'ta make peace with the way things is. No way round it. The Run is a flurry of folks tendin' to their personal chores. James is gonna busy Livetta. Might help stir her alive again."

Winston chuckled as he slapped the dust from his hat before putting it on his head. "Anyways, Esther Mae 'tain't goin' let no hands stay idle durin'

fix-up time. Granny always tol' us it's best to keep movin' so yo' lowdown thoughts can't root too deep." Then with a wink he added, "Don't be fretful, Miz Hannah. Give Livetta a few days in de hands of de Runians, and she be fine."

"Winston," I said, before he turned back to his work, "what brought Uncle Mooney back so soon?" My first thought was that word of the runaway had reached him. However, nothing in Winston's demeanor indicated anything was amiss. The quarters were a whisper mill, as Granny Morgan called it. Why were they not abuzz with talk of one of their own breaking away? Especially since it would bring a harder hand down on the rest of them.

"Don't know fo' sure why Massa is back so soon," he said after a moment of contemplation. "He's prob'ly itchin' to direct the slaughter."

Winston's matter-of-fact speculation ignited an image of hounds, frenzied by their thirst for blood, attacking the runaway I encountered only hours earlier. A shiver shook the bones beneath my skin, so I pulled my shawl tight around me to bridle the tremors released upon hearing the word *slaughter* mentioned so casually. Winston engaged me no further, and with an expressionless nod, strode away without a word of explanation.

I went back inside to collect my thoughts, and once again I was swept up in the whirl of activity. I had long observed the self-serving purpose and calculation in Aunt Augusta's comings and goings, so it should not have surprised me when the epiphany struck me that the motivation for our pre-Christmas visits had little to do with holiday gatherings or meaningful tradition. It was no more than a contrived excuse designed to distance herself from the mass of Runians as they drained from the harvested fields and were given intimate access to every corner of our house and property for the purpose of scrubbing away a year's worth of weather and wear. Challenged by the shorter days that followed the first frost, Hillcrest was a burst of activity much like a bustling anthill. From afar, the mass was chaotic and feverish, but when closely observed, each worker focused on his or her individual tasks, knowing the greater community relied on each other to share the responsibilities. Esther Mae led a group of field women from room to room, washing floors and windows and polishing every inch of woodwork and brass that adorned the interior of the house. A litter of bare-foot pickaninnies, too young for dresses or britches but old enough to

handle an oilcloth, joined in, using their oversized shirttails to add some extra shine.

“Gonna take a heap more to impress me enough to whisper yo’ name in the missus’s ear when she be lookin’ fo’ house help,” Esther Mae called out with a tilt of her head as she scrutinized their work. “Now keep at it, you hear?” She hoisted her hands to her hips and shook an impatient head in the direction of a handful of little dark faces wandering wide-eyed and slack-jawed as they took their first steps inside the walls of the main house. Esther Mae gave them a few minutes to drink it in before hustling them along to their duties. “ ’Tain’t here fo’ gawkin’. Get to work, or you be shovelin’ manure out o’ the horse stalls tomorr’y.”

My presence distracted the little ones, so I withdrew to the sewing room, where Fatima was stacking the cloth and batting Aunt Augusta had accumulated for use in the winter months, when most of the quilting was done by women on temporary respite from the fields. “Sorry, miss,” Fatima said, lowering her head as I entered. She set her work aside and scurried by me toward the door.

“Please stay, Fatima.” I smiled. “Don’t let me disturb you.”

“Yas’sum, miss,” she said with a grudging curtsy. Fatima generally went about her business in silent tolerance of the world around her. Her work was thorough and of high quality, particularly her sewing. She made extra clothing for the Runians with leftover cloth or castoffs from our wardrobes, and created most of my ball gowns, which were as fine as any shipped to my counterparts from London or Paris. She carried herself with genteel pride and dignity, rarely speaking to me unless coaxed. I felt like an awkward child as she observed me through golden, nonchalant eyes, even though her papers confirmed she was two months younger than I. During the winter months when Aunt Augusta allowed me to join the quilting circle, Fatima would sit upright and stoic while the other Runians shared stories and songs to accompany their busy fingers. She was meticulous with the stitching and sequencing of her designs, as Aunt Augusta demanded; however, her serious demeanor made me uncomfortable.

Now, left alone with me, Fatima went back to sorting the quilt squares, all the while her unreadable eyes taking stock of me as I settled on the rocker in the opposite corner of the room. I turned my attention to some needlepoint, an uninspired chore of adding yellow, unopened rosebuds to a

lace handkerchief meant as a Christmas gift for Aunt Augusta. Aware of Fatima watching me, I fumbled for a short while before losing interest three buds short of completion.

“Shorten the stitch and the design will be tighter and richer.”

“Pardon?” My one-word response was all I could muster in my surprise. Fatima came across the room and sat on the chair adjacent to me. I handed her the handkerchief and watched as she effortlessly sculpted a detailed bud from thread and needle. She laid the needlework in my lap and guided my fingers through the stitches of the intricate pattern. I smiled as I watched the next flower take form and relaxed into the movement, until suddenly a horrifying scream filled the house. Fatima’s hand jolted and sliced my finger with the needle.

“Oh, my,” I said, jumping to my feet. Fatima scrambled toward me as I pressed my finger to my lips, releasing the taste of blood on my tongue. I cried out when she grabbed on to my hand. “What are you doing, Fatima? Release my hand!”

The screams multiplied into a hair- raising chorus that flowed through every window, but Fatima’s eyes remained locked on mine. Gone was her nonchalance, replaced now with sparks of crisp determination. She pulled a quilt square from her apron pocket and pushed it toward my face. “Fatima, stop!”

She yanked my finger from my mouth. “Hold still, miss, so it don’t hurt.” She wrestled my hand toward her with unexpected strength. Before I could defend myself, she uncurled my finger and wrapped the quilt square around the scratch on my skin.

“So sorry, miss! Those dyin’ hogs made me jump right out o’ my skin.” Her eyes glistened with fear. “I didn’t mean you no harm, miss. Please don’t tell Miz ’Gusta. She won’t never let me near a needle again.”

Confusion and utter relief blanketed me as Fatima rubbed her hand over mine. She was as shaken as I was as the bellowing cries reached a frantic pitch. I covered my ears, but the screams penetrated me from head to toe. “What is that dreadful sound, Fatima?”

“It’s the hogs, miss. The slaughter has begun.”

Is this what Winston was referring to? Uncle Mooney returned to supervise the butchering of the hogs. It had nothing to do with the runaway. The murderous cries sickened me, yet a glorious thrill came with knowing

that the fate of the hogs meant hope was alive for the runaway. Fatima regained her dignified aloofness and shook her head in disbelief as I smiled at the deathly chorus.

The week dragged without Livie to share my days. Every evening, Esther Mae reported on Livie's improving spirits. Winston was right: The Runians were better equipped to heal Livie's pain in an area in which I had no knowledge or experience. The deathly squeals of the hog slaughter echoed through the hills night and day, until finally the shrieking subsided. The smokehouse was soon bursting with generous cuts of ham, bacon, and sausage, while a steady flow of wagons carried off what was considered by many to be the finest hams Virginia had to offer. The proclamation made Uncle Mooney's chest swell and his pockets bulge. The cleanup of the house and grounds was complete. Most of the women who were released back into Mud Run huddled around cook fires, boiling the excess hog fat to make soap and tallow candles. The older and less hardy Runian women weaved baskets and cornhusk dolls from remnants of the shucking celebration. December darkness fell early and brought with it long, empty nights. After a supper of pork chops and stewed apples, I went out on the porch to enjoy the peaceful stillness that had returned since the hogs were silenced. The alabaster moon was full with a bright ring illuminating the sky around it, a sure sign of winter taking hold of the mountain. Stars floated in every direction, elbowing each other for prominence in the sky. I longed to feel part of the vastness and beauty around me. A whip-poor-will beckoned from the distant fields, accompanied by the strains of a mournful mouth organ down in the quarters. Loneliness crushed me from all sides. I missed Livie, and could no longer sit idly by, so I set off through the shadows to see her.

The sounds of the quarters, once foreign and intimidating, welcomed me now. The heavy scent of ashcakes and fatback scorched the night air, enhanced by the aroma of tobacco puffed through corncob pipes. Candlelight and voices leaked through gapped frames of closed doors where families and friends congregated. Some laughed and told stories; others were pained with exhaustion from the day. The damp paths were empty because, at night, the Runians found refuge within the walls of their homes. The outline of Livie's cabin, bathed in moonlight at the end of trail, brought a smile of relief and anticipation. Her shutters were closed and

dark, but as I neared, the glint of firelight flickered from the crack of her door and invited me to where she was. I tapped lightly, thinking she may be asleep, but there was muffled movement from within.

I nudged the door halfway open and whispered, “Livie?”

A hellish orange aura smoldered from the cinders in the hearth, casting a glow across the interior, where it melded with the blackness of shadows that heaved against the far wall. My eyes perused the room for a touch point to make sense of the shimmering angles and tumbling silhouettes. I leaned in farther to better my view of Livie’s corner, where her bedding was pulled tight and undisturbed across her pallet. The air was ripe with sweat and musk, accompanied by rhythmic snorts and grunts befitting a deprived swine attacking its swill. The mass of blankets shifted in the shadows, revealing Fatima’s stoic, ebony face. Her acorn eyes, void of emotion, stared at the rafters above and winced when the rise and fall of the silhouette quickened. I stepped away in retreat, but the wood planks beneath my feet creaked as I shifted back against the door. Fatima’s lifeless eyes shifted toward me, taking in my horror; only then did she surrender a lone tear into the night. As it trickled down the side of her face and into the straw beneath her head, her eyes closed, offering no more of herself. Though all was revealed in four pounding thumps of my heart, I felt frozen in time. One long, releasing moan jerked the covers one last time, toppling the quilt onto the floor and exposing the mound on top of Fatima. Even through the dimness of the cabin, it was evident that the haunches left bare in their burst of activity were pale and lank, although the face buried in Fatima’s bosom remained masked by the long shadow of a chair. Again I stepped back, using the tip of my boot to find a solid plank that would not betray me in the now-silent cabin. However, as I bore my weight, the floor groaned in defiance. The startled figure rolled off Fatima and turned its blazing eyes toward me.

“Uncle Mooney!” His gasped name escaped me before I could stop it. Like a spooked deer, I sprang into the cool night air and dashed through the trees. I expected him to chase after me, but I whisked through the fauna without the echo of footsteps on my heels. The night opened its gullet and swallowed me whole. With tormenting pleasure, the trees rearranged themselves, and I stumbled from one to the other.

Is it the world, or is it I who is turned upside down? Where is the moon? Has it disappeared along with my belief in the moral standards by which I was raised and measured?

The branch of a hickory nearly swept me to the ground, but my legs refused to give way until more distance was put between me and the image of perverse entitlement disguised as my uncle. In my confusion, I strayed from the path, unsure if my direction was north or south. I slowed to catch my breath and bearing. I ran in the direction opposite the main house, up on the hill. If Uncle Mooney searched for me, he would begin there. Relief took my hand and led me deeper into Mud Run. I emerged from the wooded area of the living quarters. The earth sloped into the flatland where I had danced with Elijah the night of the shucking. A murky fog had settled into the belly of the valley, and if not for the pale lantern glow glimmering through the open door of the distant blacksmith shop, the world around me would have appeared in disarray. At odds with my presence, gauzy tentacles of mist swirled through the fauna and around my feet, bringing with it the prickle of imminent danger. A twig snapped to my left, dropping my heart into the hollow of my stomach. I bolted toward the lanterns in the distance, but a hand pierced the fog and yanked me backward. My shriek ripped through the trees and echoed up across the ridge.

“Let me go, Uncle Mooney! Don’t hurt me!”

The hand tightened and tugged me closer. The force spun my body to face him; however, the eyes leveled on me were not angry, vengeful, or Uncle Mooney’s at all.

“Livie!” I flung my hands over my face, unable to catch my breath. Livie gathered me in her arms and bolstered me when my legs wobbled beneath me.

“Girl, you is shakin’ like a mouse caught in a snowstorm. What’chu doin’ out here by yo’self?”

Livie snuggled one arm firmly around me as she pulled her shawl from her shoulders and wrapped me in it. The night air chilled me, but when Livie pressed her cheek lovingly to mine, I was warmed by the care and concern in her embrace.

“What’s happened, Hannah? I know you ain’t spooked fo’ nothin’.”

“I was looking for *you,* Livie.” I panted. “I couldn’t find you.”

“Well, now you found me, girl,” she said with a heavy sigh of relief. She led me over to a boulder so we could sit and face each other. “Hannah, your cries done scared me half to death.”

“I went to your cabin.”

“Oh, chile,” she moaned. “You didn’t go inside lookin’ fo’ me, did you?” We both knew the answer before the words were spoken.

“I saw something no eyes should ever see . . . something vulgar.”

“So when I grabbed yo’ arm jes’ now, you thought I was Massa, didn’t you?”

“You know about Uncle Mooney?”

“Know what, Hannah?” Livie’s mouth twisted with disgust. “Know about Massa Reynolds’s late-night visits to the quarters? Why do you think I am out here in the dark, passin’ the time?”

“Oh, Livie . . .”

“I fetched some biscuits down to James because Massa Reynolds got him workin’ night and day makin’ extra shoes fo’ the horses of some town folk. That piss-ass driver, Willy Jack, chased me off, saying James can’t be bothered on the job. No good will come to me if I show up back at the cabin before Massa is finished with his business.”

“Uncle Mooney’s done this before?”

“Folks say he used to lay down with young Maude over at his place, but she done dried up after she lost a baby in childbirth last spring. Massa is partial to light eyes and almond skin, so since the harvest, he’s been layin’ down with Fatima.”

“My God . . .” I sputtered. “Does Aunt Augusta know?”

“Don’t know how she couldn’t,” Livie said, matter-of-fact in her words, but her eyes lit with contempt. “Where do white women think their men is goin’ when the shadows fall and darkness veils their whereabouts? Jes’ one more chore we colored gals do fo’ the mistress.”

“Livie, I have been so naive.” I blinked indignant tears I had no right to cry. “Has he . . . has anyone . . . hurt you like that?”

“Not yet,” she said, letting me take her hand in mine. “But Marse Twitch has been watchin’ me hard lately.”

“I would never let him hurt you, Livie.”

“I know you mean that with all of yo’ heart.” Livie’s smile was forced with the hint of resignation. “But you can’t protect me any more than you

can protect Fatima and t'others. Livin' together in the cabin, Fatima is like family to me. So they is hurtin' me bad without layin' a finger on me. What they do to one, they is doin' to all of us. That's jes' the way of it."

"Then I will find a way to protect Fatima as well."

Livie patted my hand, and we sat quietly, watching the moon peel its way through the heavens. One by one the stars revealed themselves once more. Sharing it with my friend, I felt at one with the miraculous display. The stars seemed to look down at us with the same appreciation that we felt looking up at them. We held our breath and each other until the distant clank of hammer hitting anvil shifted our thoughts to James.

"He's a fine man," Livie sighed. "James don't say much, but there is a heap of gentleness inside him."

"He cares for you, Livie."

"He stayed by me night and day since the shucking, when I was mighty low down. At first he didn't say a word; he jes' stroked my hair when I cried and kept fresh logs on the fire. One mornin' I got prickly and told him to get on out and leave me alone, but he jes' lit his pipe and kept on rockin' in the chair alongside my bed. Finally, I cried away the last of my tears and lay wrung out on the bed. I watched him as he stared at the fire, and wondered what he was thinkin'. James said, 'Livetta, we all gots'ta do our livin' in the now. No good comes from livin' in the past or waitin' fo' a life somewhere down the road. All we got is here and now, girl.' Then he looked over at me, his eyes flickerin' with feelin', and I knowed he wasn't jes' talkin' about me. He was talkin' 'bout hisself too."

I smiled, seeing her face come alive as she spoke of James. "You love him, don't you, Liv?"

Livie closed her eyes, letting the *tap, tap, tap* of James' hammer serenade her. "My ache was so heavy, it sank me into a sorrowful pit. That man lifted my heart and me right along with it. He been so busy with Massa's work since then, ain't been much time fo' love." Livie settled a wide grin on me. "But he sure do like it when I bring him biscuits and sit by his forge while he finishes his chores."

"You do love him!" I giggled and looped my arm around Livie's, jostling her until she giggled too. "Why, Miss Livetta, you are so full of him I can practically see it spilling out of your ears." Livie laughed and jostled me

back. Instantly, our giddiness was shattered when a thunderous voice echoed through the trees.

“Hannalore! I know you are down here. Show yourself at once.”

With swift reaction, Livie pulled me behind the rock. “It’s Uncle Mooney,” I whispered frantically. The path of his search was traced by the flicker of his lantern winding down the hillside and into the far edge of the quarters.

“I have searched the house, so I know you are here. Come, now, Hannalore. You are not in trouble; I simply want to talk with you.” Uncle Mooney’s voice was tight with harnessed anger. The charm he attempted to wrap around his words was as transparent as a butcher coaxing a plump hen to the chopping block. “I don’t know what you think you saw,” he continued in a forced melodic voice. “But it won’t matter one way or the other if Augusta suspects you have been down here mingling with the chattel.”

His lantern wove among the bare trees and closed the distance between us. Crouched against the rock, Livie tucked around me like a cocoon. She whispered in my ear, “Stay quiet and let him pass.” The glow from his lantern crept toward us, bathing the brush and fauna surrounding us. We shrank into the shadow cast by the rock and remained locked together so securely it was impossible to distinguish where Livie’s trembling frame ended and mine began. The thick stench of whiskey announced his presence, and as he moved nearer, we nudged our bodies with the shifting shadow to stay out of sight. The heavy clank of tin crashed above us as Uncle Mooney slammed the lantern down on the rock.

“Damnation on you, girl,” he grumbled as the lantern teetered above our heads. A glimpse of Uncle Mooney’s hardened figure revealed him hastily dressed, with the buttons of his vest crooked and out of order. His neatly groomed muttonchop whiskers were moist with perspiration and his eyes were ablaze. Taking stock of himself, he loosened and reordered the buttons of his vest, then tugged his lapel and collar into alignment. The glow around us swirled as he snatched his lantern and panned the darkness in front of him, unable to contain his fury a moment longer.

“This is not over, Hannalore,” he snarled as he stepped beyond us and descended the hill toward the flats. “No one crosses me without retribution —least of all the orphaned offspring of darky-loving traitors. I harbor no

family obligation toward you or your parents, so you would be wise to remember who you are dealing with, or you will meet the same fate as them."

My jaw dropped in confusion and fear. All I could do was shudder in Livie's arms as Uncle Mooney disappeared from sight, his words delivering a blow that knocked me breathless.

Chapter 16

By the time Aunt Augusta returned from Roanoke, the Yule log had been raised from the swamp along the Horse's Bend, lifting the mood of the plantation as it did every year leading up to Christmas. To my surprise and utter relief, Uncle Mooney did not reappear or confront me during this time. Perhaps he had been too intoxicated to remember the incident, or simply too busy with the sale and distribution of his hams to dwell on the matter. Still, Livie and I had doubts about Uncle Mooney's intentions, so she came and stayed with me in my room, sleeping on the trundle bed as she did when she first came to Hillcrest. I halfheartedly resisted, but was inwardly grateful when she prevailed in her faithful concern for my well-being.

No outward proclamation was ever made about the slave who escaped from Uncle Mooney's stock, which was highly peculiar and piqued my curiosity about the crooked building behind West Gate. I fought the temptation to reveal my back-lot discovery to Livie. I did not want to stir her melancholy back to the forefront of her mind by rehashing the night she had mistaken the fleeing man for Marcus. James became a steady fixture by her side as the lessening burdens of the holiday season allowed the Runians a little extra time on their own. Soon, the annual holiday ball hosted by Aunt Augusta was upon us. Winston headed a group of Runians sent into the highlands to cut the blue spruce most worthy of our hearth, where it was then trimmed with candles and ornaments of fine silver.

For me, the holiday brought wistful thoughts of Christmas past. A warm, festive cabin filled with laugher and hugs. Happy people with faces I could barely remember, playfully tousling my hair and kissing my cheeks. I ached for the snugness I felt when tucked in my bed in the cabin's loft, with the sound of song and dance swirling below me. Each year those memories faded a little further, keeping me awake through restless nights, trying to fill in the lost pieces of those days. Although Uncle Mooney's denigration of my parents raised questions within me, I refused to allow his assault to dampen my mood.

What a pleasant surprise to find myself looking forward to the holiday at hand. Colt arrived home two days earlier, after spending five months in Richmond under the guidance of his mentor Dr. LaValle. Colt was euphoric upon his return and filled with stories and experiences of treating the ill and downtrodden, and seemed more of a man than when he left for the city. As I stood with him at the parlor window, watching a small line of snow geese follow the flow of the river south, it was as though he had never left. After Colt's first month gone, I had written asking him to purchase a ring on my behalf as a surprise for Livie. I carefully traced a circle on paper as measure for size, and printed detailed instructions for a ring of simple pewter with the letters L and H etched side by side in delicate balance. I was delighted with his choice, and it pleased him when I kissed his cheek in gratitude.

"If I had known payment was to be so sweet, I would have bought the entire display of fine baubles and presented them to you day after day until your heart was mine, Miss Hannalore Blessing."

I giggled at his teasing remark as I ran my gloved thumb over the letters of the ring, bringing forth more luster. When I looked up into the gold dust sprinkled in Colt's dark eyes, they were soft and penetrating, without a hint of boyish silliness. I realized Colt was not teasing me. My heart and breath failed me, leaving me motionless until I willed them back to life. Suddenly, I was flushed and unbalanced. I opened my mouth to speak, but my words fell over themselves, unable to find root in the emotion Colt was hoping to pull from me. I loved Colt, dearly and completely. In his absence, I often ached for the comfort his nearness afforded me. But did that make him a potential suitor or a brotherly confidant? I had never seen sincere desire looking at me through a man's eyes, but my instincts recognized it now. He leaned closer to me, searching my eyes for invitation. My heart wobbled, unsure whether to retreat from him or protect his vulnerability. He lifted a finger and placed it gently on my lips.

"Say nothing for now, Hannah. I am surprised by these feelings as well. But given time to digest them, you will realize as I have, the affection has been seeded and growing for years."

His finger hesitated before leaving my lips, then brushed along my cheek and up under my chin, tilting it upward to catch my mouth with his. My eyes never closed as I watched him savor the taste of my lips. His kiss ached with tenderness, raising a warm tingle within me where his hands

caressed my face, releasing like a wave down the nape of my neck and across my breast. I stepped back with cheeks flushed where his hands had stroked me.

“I must go and ready for tonight,” I gasped in full retreat. “There is much to do, and I need time to prepare.”

Colt brushed his hand from my elbow to my fingertips, bringing them to his lips before releasing them with a smile. “Go then, Hannah. Take all the time you need to ready yourself. Preparation is vital. The celebration will be all the more memorable and enriching once you are ready.”

Colt’s meaning was clear and had little to do with the night’s festivity. As Colt made his leave, the sliver of composure I had held on to left me. I sprinted up the steps, stumbling twice on the hem of my dress as I navigated the stairs as awkwardly as my journey between girl and woman. I did not know what to expect or feel. Common sense told me to stop, slow down, and get my footing under me. First the stairs, and then whatever else followed.

Alone in my room, I sat at my vanity, gazing into the looking glass without notice to the perplexed image fretting back at me. My thoughts continued to swirl with confusion, until the chorus of banging pots and clanking dishes echoed from downstairs, reminding me the house was humming with last-minute preparation for guests on the brink of arrival. The door swung wide and Livie came rushing at me from across the room.

“I jes’ knowed you be up here dawdlin’, girl,” she said as she loosened the pins in my hair so she could stroke my locks into order. “Folks will be comin’ soon. I am helpin’ Esther Mae downstairs. Everything is fine and fanciful. Never see’d nothin’ like it. Massa Charbonneau’s cold heart never felt nothin’ special ’bout Big Times. He say the sun come up and go down like any other day. Sometimes we worked, or sometimes Massa be gone and the overseer saw fit to give us a day to tend to our own chores. Folks on ol’ Massa’s plantation said t’other massas roundabout don’t even call their properties out fo’ work fo’ two, even three, days in a row come Big Times. Some said that no workdays come with a jar of blackstrap molasses fo’ each cabin, and visitin’ papers fo’ them with family scattered on other plantations. I shrugged ’em off as tall tales, since nothin’ seemed no different from where I was sittin’.”

“Charbonneau? Is he the cruel owner you ran away from?”

Livie halted, realizing she let slip a detail of her past that had remained unknown even to me. Anxiety wrenched her face, so to make light of her revelation, I fought back my curiosity and shifted our conversation to what she could expect of Christmas at Hillcrest.

“Tonight’s festivities will be grand, with the finest families of the county invited to join us for a Christmas Eve feast followed by dancing and singing in the parlor. Shortly after sunrise tomorrow, all the Runians from oldest to youngest will gather around the front porch. Winston stands midway on the steps, greeting everyone, and when all heads are accounted for, he begins playing cheerful tunes on his fiddle. The littlest pickaninnies are lifted onto wooden crates placed along the porch, where they dance and clap with the music coaxing us from the house. When Aunt Augusta and I hear the fiddle, we come out onto the porch and are entertained by the singing and dancing. When the last note floats up the mountain, Aunt Augusta formally acknowledges the Runians for their loyalty and the year’s production. She instructs Winston and two chosen field hands to open the crates and disperse two pounds of salted pork, two jars of molasses, and a peck of cornmeal to the head of each family or cabin. Each slave receives a new pair of ox-hide shoes and a coat for the coming year. The men stand in line to receive a set of wool trousers and cotton shirt, while women receive a pair of wool stockings and skirt with cotton shimmy. Chambray cloth is given to each household for the women to make additional clothing as needed, and each child is given two oranges delivered north from the warm groves south of Georgia.”

Livie had stopped brushing my hair and stared at my reflection, as if I were telling her a bedtime fairy tale. I thought she would squeal with glee, but she stood more like a woman than I had ever seen her. She soaked it in, as if needing time to understand the motive. So I continued.

“I love the excitement, although some Runians are simply dutiful in their participation. It is a brief moment of being connected to each other, usually soiled by Aunt Augusta’s expectation that each Runian come forward to thank her for her generosity and for being such a fine mistress. Satisfied with their well-orchestrated reverence, she dismisses them with the promise of no call to duty while the Yule log burns. Of course, the house slaves find no reprieve in this decree; however, their duties are lightened greatly once

tonight’s party has concluded. Only then will they have time to spend with their families.”

“Do Massa Reynolds do the same over at West Gate?”

“Of the two plantations, Aunt Augusta is held with better regard for her treatment of her slaves—a wise calculation in her mind. When Uncle Mooney scoffs at her allowances, she tells him, ‘Loosen the reins enough to allow them to gallop and prance. Then when the reins are pulled tight again, both mind and muscle will be ripe in the bridle.’”

“Does he follow suit?”

“No, he simply sucks his cigar and puffs smoke rings into the air, as if considering her suggestion, then snorts in amusement at her yearly urging.” Disappointment dulled Livie’s eyes as she took in my words, so with a coy smile I sparked them bright again. “Uncle Mooney may not gift his stock as much as Aunt Augusta; however, his slaves are not called to duty during the burning of the Yule log as well. You and James can enjoy your own Big Times this week.”

Livie’s smile radiated enough pure joy to keep it glowing several hours later as she joined the ranks of the kitchen help in serving warmed spiced cider to our guests as they arrived. Uncle Mooney’s carriage rumbled onto the property first. As Winston opened the door, Uncle Mooney walked in full stride from the porch.

“Winston, why aren’t these lanterns lit? If not for the full moon, we would have misdirected the horses into the side yard.”

“Sorry, sah,” Winston said, dipping his head as he removed Uncle Mooney’s coat. “De wind must have snuffed ’em.”

“Send your boy out and spark them immediately.”

“Yas’sah, Massa Reynolds. I’ll send Elijah out directly.”

“Good evening, Winston.” Colt nodded as he came in behind Uncle Mooney. Then, when his father was out of earshot, he added, “No rush on those lanterns. The heavens are shining brighter than seventy lanterns burning as one. No sense wasting wick for naught.”

Twitch pushed by and threw his rawhide coat at Winston. Christmas Eve was the one time of year when Twitch entered our house as a guest. Uncle Mooney insisted on including him in the festivities, with the promise that his usual rogue appearance would be groomed and dressed properly. And

though Twitch's suit was tailored and his whiskers trimmed, no amount of polishing could make a cinder shine as a pearl.

"Good evenin', Hannah," Twitch said, straightening his pantaloons indiscreetly as he neared me. "You look fine enough fo' a gentleman to fo'get his manners." His spongy teeth were bathed in the scent of whiskey.

I remained nonchalant. "I shall remember your words the next time I am in the presence of a gentleman."

Not to be outdone, he countered with a low, snide whisper that curdled in the pit of my stomach. "I won't deny your point, 'cuz a gentleman could never enjoy the thoughts I am havin' about the soft parts of you, warm and waitin' underneath all that lace."

"What's that you say?" Colt stepped to my side, but it was apparent he had not heard the content of Twitch's suggestive prodding. However, the uncomfortable turn of my face had Colt on guard.

"Nothin', Purebred. I won't waste breath on a spineless do-good like you." Twitch smirked and then moved on to leave Colt to stew in annoyance.

"What did he—"

I took Colt's arm and led him into the parlor. "Let's not let Twitch darken the evening. He would love nothing more than to rile us tonight. I will not give him the satisfaction."

Colt escorted me to the hearth draped with ribbon and evergreen boughs, where we watched the lively Yule log snap and dance. "While I was away, you have blossomed into a confident and mature young woman." He stepped closer and rested his hand against the small of my back. "You are no longer a child, and there is not an unattached man in the room who is not looking at you as a beautiful and enticing woman."

I laughed lightly and kept my eyes on the fire.

"Seriously, Hannah. There was a time when Twitch knew exactly what to say or do to bring you to tears. Now even he is off balance in your presence."

"If he is off balance, it is more whiskey than me."

"I am merely cautioning you to stay on guard." He grinned. "The man sleeps with hound dogs, for God's sake."

The cider I sipped burst from my lips in laughter. Colt and I giggled together, unable to stop, as one wave of giddiness receded and another

rushed over us. We were chums again. No awkwardness of evolved feelings or changed roles. We slipped back into easy banter and private jokes and the blessed comfort of friendship. It was the best gift Colt could have given me.

The splendor of Hillcrest unfolded like a poinsettia sprinkled alive with Christmas gaiety. The room swelled with music and laughter as thirty guests rode in from the surrounding countryside. All braved a brisk December evening to be present and accounted for at a social event that skimmed and separated the cream of the county from a commoner's pail. The Watkins family arrived with Mabelle, who would remain with us for the week visiting with Granny Morgan. Mr. Snead the banker was there with his wife, Charmaine. Colonel Richards, dressed in full decorative uniform, pranced from one available debutante to the next. The enthralled women welcomed his advances by using their laced fans and polite curtsies to conceal the fact they were elbowing each other for the privilege of hanging on his every word. The Henderson family and Moffett clan completed the elite circle, all mingling to strengthen business connections, search for suitable matches for sons and daughters, and, above all, toast the superiority of Southern life. Every plantation within forty miles was represented by men dressed in their finest suits and women adorned in velvet, hooped gowns. All were smitten with the pleasure of status.

"Hear, hear," Colonel Richards bellowed shortly after our guests were directed to the dining room. "Let us raise a toast to Augusta, our gracious and generous hostess."

A wave of champagne flutes rose in Aunt Augusta's direction, but she was engrossed in a conversation with Uncle Mooney at the far corner of the room. When she noticed the revelers awaiting her acknowledgment, she nodded her head stiffly and offered a thin smile, allowing her guests to return to the festivity and find their appointed seats around the expansive oak table set with hand-painted china and brass candelabras. It was odd that Aunt Augusta did not say a few words in honor of her guests. The pre-dinner toast was traditionally her moment to bask in the admiration of her peers, so her obvious distraction unnerved me. I had noticed her moments earlier when Uncle Mooney initially cornered her near the windows as they were leaving the parlor. When they glanced in my direction, I sensed a shift in Aunt Augusta's demeanor. I had taken great care in avoiding Uncle Mooney since his arrival, and when our paths inevitably crossed near the

cider bowl, his amused expression showed no sign of shame or humility with regard to the transgression I had witnessed weeks earlier.

“Good evening, Hannalore,” he said, his lips curling in contempt. “You appear more a proper young lady than the last time I was in your presence.”

My only recourse was to hold my head high and deny him the satisfaction of seeing me flush in defense. To my surprise, a little of Livie’s spunk surfaced in me. “As you look more a gentleman.” I smiled, feigning pleasantness. “That is, with your britches drawn and buttoned.”

I was proud I had absorbed some of what I admired in Livie, and the ruffled expression on Uncle Mooney’s face was worth whatever consequence would follow. He stormed away, leaving me amused until regretful afterthoughts began poking at me. Uncle Mooney would not allow my comments to pass without consequence, and his response would be swift. I was not fearful of any discomfort he could cause me, but what if he chose to strike out at me through the people I cared about most in life?

With the exception of Colt, no one else in the room seemed to notice the lack of usual fanfare accompanying the toast. Even his reaction was a mere shrug as he slid my chair beneath me as I sat down. If Twitch had his way, he would have laid claim to the seat at my right, but Colt politely guarded the chair as his own. Not one to abide by manners, Colonel Richards dropped himself onto the chair to my left, forcing Twitch across the table and two table settings down, a comfortable distance for me to enjoy my meal.

* * *

Esther Mae, Livie, and Fatima, dressed in matching gray dresses, served each course beginning with smoked quail and bread pudding. The three servants floated like wisps of smoke through a room filled with dismissive glances. I smiled and played my part as expected, all the while disengaged from the conversation humming around me so I could watch Fatima serve the far end of the table, where Aunt Augusta, Uncle Mooney, and the elders of the gathering talked of their bountiful year. Uncle Mooney did not so much as look up when Fatima placed a slice of quail in front of him.

Outside Mud Run, she did not exist to him. However, gauging from the clenched muscles along Fatima's tight jawline, Uncle Mooney was a reality she could never deny. My gaze followed Fatima as she continued to move from guest to guest. Suddenly, like a monocle held up to an unfocused eye, my course of vision locked onto Aunt Augusta's glare as Fatima passed behind her. My heart quaked as Aunt Augusta's disapproval blazed toward me across the length of the table. I flushed from its red-hot intent and quickly averted my eyes in escape.

"You have not eaten one bite, Miss Blessin'," Colonel Richards said, leaning heavily on his elbow and providing me a welcomed shield. "Is the meal not to your satisfaction?"

"Oh, it is splendid indeed, Colonel. I suppose all the holiday excitement has me a bit squeamish."

"I declare, you and Augusta are spoiled by Granny Morgan's fine cookin'. If you ever had to suffer through a meal at the hands of my kitchen wench, you would gobble up these delectable morsels like the Last Suppa."

The Moffett sisters, who were placed one on each side of Twitch, giggled incessantly at the Colonel's droll remarks. They fluttered their eyelashes and flashed their equine teeth, to his delight. As I watched the flirtatious ritual play out, I noticed Twitch eyeing Livie like a hawk circling an innocent field mouse. He followed the curve of her body as she moved around the table, clearing plates. When she slipped alongside him to reach for an empty bowl, he discreetly leaned into her so his cheek brushed her upper torso and breast as she backed away. The move was so slick it would have been missed, even by me, had I not been watching him so closely. Livie froze. She kept her eyes fixed on the plate in her hands, her instincts warning her not to look in the direction of an overseer. She hesitated for one perplexing second, as if reckoning whether the contact was deliberate or incidental. I could not read her conclusion, because her face was vacant like that of Fatima's the night I saw Uncle Mooney on top of her. Livie shifted the plates in her hands and moved on. Twitch bantered with the colonel about who was the better marksman, and just as I was about to give him the benefit of the doubt, I caught him take a glimpse at Livie as she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Miss Blessin', your aunt informs me she would like to expand your education."

“Pardon me?” I was so intent on Twitch, I did not realize Colonel Richards was speaking to me.

“Pardonez-moi, s’il vous plait,” he said playfully. All I could do was stare at him, completely befuddled. “The words are French, my dear,” he continued after draining his glass of sherry. “The language of love. The refined young ladies of Richmond speak it fluently. My cousin from Carolina happens to be one of the most elite French tutors east of the Smoky Mountains. He is in high demand for his talents, but as a favor to your aunt, I agreed to ask him to consider an extended visit to Virginia.”

“You are ever so kind, Colonel, although I hope Aunt Augusta allows me some opinion in the matter.”

The colonel’s brows drew together like heavy drapes as he studied my indifferent countenance and contemplated if my answer was designed to offend him. It was, of course, and hopefully enough to steer his attention elsewhere. Fortunately, his thoughts ran as deep as rain on a tin roof, so with an unshaken grin, he nodded. “Indeed.”

“Oh, Colonel,” the Moffett sisters chimed from across the table. “We would love to study with your French-speaking cousin.” The colonel quickly lapped up their attention until his amused expression turned to boredom. He politely disengaged from them by striking up a conversation with Twitch.

“Mister Grayson, have you had any rewardin’ adventures of late?”

Twitch eased his beet red lips from his glass of sherry and grinned. “Wrangled a dozen head over in Kentucky last month. Me and the hounds cut ’em off less than a mile from the banks of the Ohio. Dragged ’em back to their rightful owner and earned a hefty reward for my trouble.”

“Well done,” the colonel said, raising his glass. “As someone who spends time near the northern border, can you tell us if there is any truth to the rumors of confrontation between abolitionists from the North and Southern militia? I thought once the outrageous business with Dred Scott was settled, all this Northern interference would end.”

“Them Yankee meddlers will have war before they have our colored.” Twitch smirked.

“Excuse me, gentlemen.” Aunt Augusta’s voice rose as she tapped a fork rapidly against her glass. “Perhaps a change in dinner conversation is in order. I find pondering such notions in mixed company distasteful. This is a

holiday celebration, so I insist you respect the occasion and confine your business discussions in the parlor amid after-dinner cigars."

"My apologies, Augusta," Colonel Richards offered with a contrite wave of his hand. "You are correct in remindin' us of the delicate ears present that should not be exposed to such coarse subject matter. Please accept my apology as well, ladies."

With a flutter of their powdered eyes, the Moffett sisters fawned forgiveness all over him, and by the time the main course was served, they were once again vying for the colonel's attention with renewed excitement. Livie came through the kitchen doors, balancing a silver platter of fresh ham and fixings. She was followed by Esther Mae carrying a tray with crystal bowls overflowing with squash, turnips, and stewed okra. Fatima tagged behind with a large dish of sweet potatoes. After placing the ham at the center of the table, Livie moved about serving our guests, all the while carefully avoiding coming too near to Twitch. I was relieved when Genevieve Moffett had a momentary coughing fit, because when Twitch turned to offer her a glass of water, Livie jumped at the opportunity to reach over and put a generous slice of shank on his plate and then quickly move farther down the table. Balancing her tray in the hand nearest me, Esther Mae stepped between my chair and the colonel's.

"Do not be light- handed, woman," he said. "This is the meal I dream of throughout the year."

"Same goes for me, girl," Twitch barked at Livie. "Bring that juicy ham closer and dish me some more."

Livie hesitated, as if considering reaching across Genevieve to serve him. Esther Mae must have read her mind, because even though they were forbidden to speak while serving dinner, Esther Mae cleared her throat, abruptly stopping Livie before she did something foolish. Livie's shoulders rounded in obedience. The silence forced upon my friend lit a fire in me.

Jovial compliments of the fine cooking and the abundance of food provided by Aunt Augusta faded into the background as my eyes moved with Livie when she came around and stepped between Genevieve and Twitch. If not for the angle of my seat to where she stood, I would have been oblivious to Twitch's shrewd assault. He slouched back on his chair, letting his hand fall to his side, and as Livie leaned toward his plate, his hand reached under the hem of her dress and slowly moved up her leg in

search of more. Livie's eyes widened, and a torch of outrage ignited me. I sprang from my seat, driving my shoulder up under Esther Mae's outstretched arms with enough force to knock the bowl of squash from the platter and send it tumbling through the air until it flopped directly onto Twitch's lap.

He released Livie with a bellow and jumped to his feet. "You dim-witted fool!"

"I's sorry, Marse," Esther Mae cried out, steadying the other two bowls before they met the same fate as the squash. "I is clumsy is all."

"It is not Esther Mae's fault, Twitch," I intervened. "A mouse must have come in from the pantry. I panicked when it scurried across my foot. Thank goodness Esther Mae saved the other bowls from spilling as well."

"Child, my patience is at its end," Aunt Augusta hissed from behind me. "Go get a facecloth from the basin in your room so Twitchell can clean himself up. Livetta, wipe up that mess and fetch a new bowl of squash."

I glanced at Livie, whose shocked expression was about to give way to laughter. I rushed around the table to escape the room as quickly as possible. Livie picked the bowl off the floor, and as she turned for the kitchen, we brushed at the elbow.

"You is a sharpshooter, crazy girl," she whispered from the corner of her mouth. It was all we could do to contain our chuckles as we separated and exited through opposite entrances of the room.

By the time I returned with the moistened facecloth, Twitch was in the parlor, cussing and grumbling as he tried to make himself presentable. He snatched the cloth from my hand and scrubbed at the rusty stain that darkened the crotch of his pantaloons.

"You don't seem too sorry," he said, his dead eye squinted in anger. "Almost seems like you done it on purpose."

"Now, Twitchell Grayson, whatever would make me do such a thing?"

Twitch glared at me and shoved the cloth back at me. "Don't think I ain't watchin' you and your uppity colored girl. The both of you need to learn your place. You ain't better than me. We is all the same . . . you, me, and your fancy Purebred. So ya'll better start showin' me proper respect, or ya'll will get more than you bargained for."

I stood my ground in spite of the apprehension his raw anger stirred in me. "Don't you threaten me, Twitch."

“Oh I don’t waste time threatenin’, girl. I get right to the business of doin’. And nobody gets spared once I been pushed too far. You best remember that.”

Chapter 17

The remainder of the evening was a blur, as the tide of my family turned against me. I was no longer a little girl scolded by a coldhearted aunt. I was a young woman whose thoughts and actions were judged and condemned based on the social structure in which I was raised. It would not be tolerated. *I* would not be tolerated if I defied their will and expectations.

I retired from the party and sought sanctuary in my room. The hallway leading to my chambers was tomblike without the usual glint of light glowing along the doorframe of Aunt Augusta's bedroom. She somehow managed denying me even this small measure of comfort when I needed it most. The moon grayed within a murky haze. From my window, everything beyond the light streaming from the downstairs windows was dark and cold. The lanterns near the gate remained unlit, an oversight for which Winston would be called to task. The rise and fall of a waltz in the rooms below me could not be silenced by the feathered pillow I pressed over my head. So I wrapped myself in my covers and let the music rock me like a boat riding the crests of a stormy river, until sleep pulled me to safe harbor.

"Is you sleepin', Hannah?"

A gentle tug of my blankets coaxed me awake. Livie sat on the edge of the bed, bathed in the glow of a candle she cupped with her hand. The stillness of the room marked the late hour.

"Has the gala ended?"

"The last of 'em been gone fo' a spell now. Esther Mae and me jes' finished gettin' things back in order."

I paused for moment in queasy disgust. "He had no right doing that to you."

"He may not have the right," she said, growing tense. "But he sure do hold the power."

The flicker of candlelight across Livie's face accentuated her strain. I was ashamed I could not offer argument. I had let myself believe I was providing her a wonderful life. However, the events of the evening made it clear that in spite of my good intentions, Livie was still denied the most

basic of human entitlements, protection and dignity being the most obvious at the moment. No words could change the reality of this truth, and I did not want to make light of her feelings by filling the moment with contrite and awkward sentiment. I simply reached out and stroked her cheek until she rested her head on my shoulder.

“Will you stay here with me tonight? I am concerned you may not be safe down at the cabin. It’s clear Twitch had a bellyful of whiskey and a filthy mind for you.”

Livie nodded and knelt to the floor to pull out the trundle bed. “Don’t bother with that. Just crawl under the bedcovers with me.”

“Miz ’Gusta ain’t gonna like this none,” Livie quipped, climbing into bed without hesitation. “I s’pose the worst that could happen is she’ll have my hide. Rather it be in her hands than that one-eyed, bony-ass piece of manure.”

In unison, we yanked the covers over our heads to muffle our burst of laughter. As so often happened, Livie’s humor lightened the problems at hand. My worries receded into the darkness as we nestled together and let the world fall away for the night. Having worked all day, Livie drifted off in three slow blinks of an eye. I rolled on my side to face her and marveled at the composure and strength she exuded even in sleep. Having soaked her into me all these months, I had grown and awakened in ways that caused me tormented confusion. Not confusion rooted in ignorance and naïveté, but rather confusion brought by truth. I had questions whose traditional answers deserved rejection and challenge. Within my heart and soul, there had been a natural and still-evolving enlightenment. It could not, and perhaps should not, be stifled in secrecy forever. However, the morbid danger for everyone involved was imminent and undeniable. A chill tingled across my skin, so I pushed my worries back before they could take hold. I tucked the blankets snug around us and started to sink into sleep when a thought popped into my mind.

“Livie, are you asleep?”

Livie’s eyes fluttered but remained closed. “I’s sleepin’ all right, and havin’ a fitful dream that I is a tuckered-out hornet and some crazy fool is whuppin’ my hive with a hickory switch.”

“What if this crazy fool had a present for the ornery ol’ hornet?”

“Did I say hornet?” Livie smiled as she propped up on her elbow to see if I was serious. “What I meant to say was honeybee.”

“What utter hogwash.” I laughed. “And if you try to soft-soap me by saying I am a delicate flower in this dream, I will toss you from this bed immediately.”

“Nah,” she snickered. “You ain’t no flower, jes’ the same crazy fool.”

I crossed my arms and feigned insult, but my excitement kept me from playing too long. I sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed.

“Since you will spend most of Christmas Day with James and the Runians, I want to give you a gift tonight. A special gift from me to you.”

I went to the drawer of my dresser and pulled a small box tied with ribbon from beneath my lace handkerchiefs. When I turned back, Livie was out of bed with her arm shoved under the mattress. She ran her hand back and forth until it emerged holding a leather pouch no larger than a plum that was tied with a thin length of rawhide.

“I gots a present fo’ you too. Hope you don’t mind me hidin’ it here in the big house, but with Massa Reynolds prowlin’ around the cabin, I thought it was right smart to leave it here fo’ safekeepin’.”

“Livie, I am so touched.” I took the pouch from her outstretched hand and replaced it with the box I had taken from my dresser. I brushed my fingertips to her cheek and softly placed a kiss on the other. “You are the best and dearest friend I could ever hope to have.”

Tears sparkled in our eyes as we opened our gifts. I loosened the rawhide around the pouch and folded back the leather. Inside was a homemade yet magnificent ring designed from a molded iron nail. At the center, where the head of the nail spread flat, was an etching of a tiny heart, one half darkened with what looked like copper and the other half paled by a speck of silver.

“Livie, it is so beautiful.” She glowed with pride seeing me overcome with warm emotion.

“ ’Tain’t fanciful, but I made it myself. James helped me shape it down at the blacksmith shop. I used a nail to scrape out the heart and smoothed it with an oilcloth fo’ weeks.” She touched a delicate finger to the bicolor heart, then looked up into my overflowing eyes with softness and sincerity. “It’s our hearts together like one, ’cuz that’s how we is, you and me.”

I put my arms around her and held her close. “I love it, Livie, just as I love you. And I will treasure it always and forever.” I held Livie for a precious moment until my eagerness got the better of me.

“Now open your gift, Liv.”

Livie cradled the box like a child would a fallen robin’s egg. With gentle rotation, she examined it from every side. “I never had anything so wondrous meant fo’ me.”

“Well, open it, silly girl, and see what is inside.”

She looked at me with shimmering innocence, not wanting to spoil the neatly tied ribbon. I smiled at her pure appreciation. Helping her, I tugged the end of the ribbon, letting it unravel from the box.

“See,” I said, tying it at the root of one of her braids. “You can save this and wear it in your hair.”

Livie ran her fingertips down the length of it and smiled. I was ready to burst when she finally lifted the top from the box. Her gasp was so expansive, it caught in her throat. She pressed her hand against her breast, as if keeping her heart from tumbling out. With eyes growing twice in size, she stared, enthralled by the ring. Tears as big as droplets in an April shower were running down her cheeks by the time her eyes came to mine. Her lips trembled to speak, but the unspoken words flowing between us said all that needed saying.

Livie slipped her ring on and held it up for us both to admire. I slid mine on as well, and reached up to bridge our ringed hands together. I whispered, “The best gift of all is that you and I feel the same about our friendship and thought to express it in the same way.”

Livie’s tears turned to laughter. I began laughing as well, but had no idea why.

“Esther Mae is right. We *is* the two craziest gals in all o’ Virginny.” I could not help chuckling at Livie’s amusement, even though it masked the serious truth behind the giggle.

“What is so crazy about two friends showing their care for one another?”

“We is crazy ’cuz we is cryin’ buckets over rings we can’t never wear.” She laughed harder. “ ’Tain’t a soul, white nor colored, would think I came by a piece o’ fine jewelry in a right and honest way. Knowin’ each other has changed you and me, but the other folks round here is the same, and as

mean as they always been. You heard the talk downstairs about marauders and war. The world is more hateful every day."

I had been so caught up in the sentiment the rings represented it had not occurred to me they would likely bring damnation as monumental as the mountains around us. Livie was right. She would be whipped without question. Or worse. Certainly Aunt Augusta would retrieve and dispose of any evidence with the potential of soiling my reputation, and hers by association. Yet Livie and I vowed we would not be parted from our precious keepsakes.

"I got an idea," Livie said, taking the strip of rawhide that had tied the pouch she had given me. She removed the ring from her finger and threaded the rawhide through it. With a look of pure satisfaction, she tied it around her neck, then dropped the ring inside the collar of her dress. "Out o' sight, but close at heart."

Following her lead, I went to the jewelry box on my night table and rummaged through its contents, pushing hairpins and brooches aside until I saw the glimmer of a simple gold necklace coiled in the corner. I lifted it out and let it dangle like a strand of hair in front of me.

"It was my mother's," I whispered reverently.

She took the necklace from me as I removed my ring. Once it was threaded, Livie hooked the clasp at the back of my neck. I held the ring entwined with my mother's necklace and was dizzied by a swirl of emotion. Livie loosened the first few buttons of my nightgown, then took the ring and dropped it inside. I smiled at her as I watched how tenderly she handled both the ring and the necklace.

"Always close at heart," I whispered.

We crawled back into bed, drained from the highs and lows of the day. We curled and faced each other with heavy eyes. My last recollection was of Livie brushing her hand across her chest until her fingers found and outlined the ring beneath her clothes. I did the same, tucking away the worry of what would become of us for another day.

Chapter 18

"Rise and dress, Hannalore." Aunt Augusta's curt voice tore through the peaceful slumber cradling me. She stood at the corner of my bed, waiting for me to sit up and obey. I glanced toward the empty spot next to me. Thankfully, Livie had slipped from my room before sunrise.

"The Runians are gathering in the front yard. I shall wait for you in the dining room."

I abided her request and was downstairs before she finished her morning tea. She peered at me over her cup as I entered the room, but said nothing until I curtsied and offered her Christmas wishes. She did not return the greeting, and although her demeanor was distant and distracted, she did not appear angry as she had been the previous night.

"You retired early last night. Our guests were concerned and thought you had taken ill. Colton was particularly dismayed."

"I apologize if my absence offended anyone. One of my dizzy spells came upon me, so I went to lie down in my room until it passed. I must have fallen asleep."

" 'Scuse me, Miz 'Gusta," Winston said, stepping into the room. "We got de whole o' Mud Run outside. If you is ready, I'll start with de fiddlin'."

"Yes, you may begin, Winston. Hannah and I will join you once we hear the music."

"As you say." Winston nodded. "Happy Christmas, Miz Hannah."

"Happy Christmas." I smiled, pleased someone acknowledged me with holiday wishes. When Winston flashed his *we got a secret* grin, I felt for the first time that he and I finally did share an unspoken truth after all these years. With all of Mud Run under his watchful eye, he was surely aware of my comings and goings during the past month. My instinct told me my secret was safe with him.

Christmas morning unfolded as it always had, only this year it had more meaning for me with Livie's smiling face in the crowd. Coming from a neglectful master, she was taken aback by the armful of food, clothing, and shoes she walked away with. Still, she turned back to me and patted her

chest where the ring dangled beneath her clothes and mouthed the words *Happy Christmas*. Then she walked down the hill to the Runian festivities, and I returned to the hollow of the house.

“I have a gift for you, Aunt Augusta.” I presented her the embroidered handkerchief I had sewn for her.

“Place the gift on the chair, child. I want to speak with you.”

I set the handkerchief aside and went to where she stood studying the decorated tree. Among the burgundy ribbons and silver decorations was an unpretentious, handmade ornament. It was a delicately embroidered handkerchief that was fitted in an oval frame no larger than a pear. Across the center was a line of cross- stitching that gave the appearance of a row of figures joined at the hands with a lone star above them, similar to the design of the household quilt patterns.

“Your mother gave me this ornament the year you were born.”

My heart fluttered because she so rarely spoke of my mother. I assumed their relationship was not close because they were so different; however, a soft, yearning expression pained her face as she admired the ornament twirling slowly on the evergreen bough.

“Everything was plain and simple for her,” she mused, drawing me into her reminiscence. “I envied her for it.” As quickly as Aunt Augusta gave me the warm reflection, she snatched it away. “It also made me fear for her. The world is not a plain and simple place. One wrong step, and a sea of consequence will crash down on you.”

She was glaring at me now, waiting for a response. “Your uncle tells me he saw you frequenting Mud Run while I was away.”

“I was only—”

“You have no business there, and I will not stand for improper behavior. You have grown too familiar with Livetta, and the repercussions resulting from an indiscretion of this nature are more far-reaching than a child’s mind can grasp.”

“Stop calling me a child. I am a grown woman, and your harsh words no longer frighten me.”

She grabbed my shoulders roughly and shook me. “It is not me you need to fear. This is not a game. I cannot protect you outside these walls. Southern tradition and structure are under attack. Anyone who moves

against public opinion will be viewed as a traitor. And punished as one as well."

"Livie was ill. I went to check on her, the same as you look in on the Runian women when they deliver a child. Did you ask Uncle Mooney how he came to see me that night?" I pushed her hands off me. "He was down there having his way with Fatima, and I walked in on him. So don't you ever preach to me about proper behavior."

Aunt Augusta was aghast, and I took great pleasure in delivering the blow.

"Mooney was in Mud Run?"

"Squealing like a pig in slop. And it was not his first visit to Fatima, poor thing. I cried for her too, and am not ashamed to admit it."

I turned and ran from the room, expecting Aunt Augusta to command me to stop, but no harsh words came. Although I won the battle, when I reached my room, I screamed against my pillow in frustration. It was all so hopeless. Near midday, there came a soft tap against the door.

"Hannah, are you there?" Colt's voice was low and soothing. "Augusta is visiting West Gate. Come down to the sitting room and talk with me."

When I opened the door, his smile coaxed me out of hiding. "That's my girl," he said, offering me his elbow. "I was concerned when you disappeared last night. I had your promise of the last dance, but you were nowhere to be found."

"Forgive me, Colt. I just could not bear another moment."

"Oh, thankfully there is nothing to forgive," he said as we reached the bottom of the staircase. He escorted me to the bench near the tree, where we sat side by side. "Genevieve Moffett was tracking me like a basset hound, so I took refuge in the kitchen with Granny Morgan. Now, if Genevieve had found me and claimed me for a dance, then forgiveness would be out of the question."

He nudged me until I smiled, and it felt good. My dear Colt. Even though I was certain Aunt Augusta had sent him to speak to me, I let my guard down enough to tease him back.

"I imagine the inconvenience of being sequestered in the kitchen was offset by the possibility of commandeering an extra piece of Granny's apple cobbler."

"Sweet Hannah," Colt laughed. "You know me well."

“I know you well enough to suspect you would not knock on my chamber door without approval from Aunt Augusta.”

“Her distress is not without cause. I warned you from the beginning that you had to be careful with regard to Livetta. It is a delicate matter, now more than ever. You must act with your head instead of your heart.”

“I should have known you would side with Aunt Augusta,” I said, dripping with disappointment.

“We are not on opposite sides. These are dangerous times, and my warning is meant to protect you from harm. And protect Livetta as well. I feel an attachment to her just as you do. However, you cannot let your feelings go too far.”

Colt’s plea was genuine and serious. “I have been away a long time and can sense the shifting undercurrents throughout Virginia. Promise me, Hannah. Promise me you will practice better judgment, or the consequence will endanger you and those around you.”

I nodded, as much to encourage a change of subject as to appease him. It was apparent by his unruffled mood that Colt had not been told of his father’s assault on Fatima. Just as well. I did not want Colt hurt or shamed by his father’s indiscretions. We lightened our conversation with holiday gaiety and exchanged gifts. He presented me with an ivory comb for my hair, while I gave him a silk neckerchief ordered from a catalog in the mercantile.

“When will you return to Richmond?”

“Father has plans for me here.” Colt shrugged as he absentmindedly unfolded and refolded a corner of the neckerchief on his lap.

“What about your apprenticeship with Dr. LaValle?”

“What is the use, Hannah? Each time I return home, it is as if I never left. The expectations remain the same. I am tired of fighting my father.”

“Have you lost your love for medicine?”

“Not at all,” he said, lighting up. “When I use my hands for healing, I feel alive with divine purpose. I wake up before dawn because I cannot wait to begin a new day.”

I smiled and put my hand over his. “Tell me, Colt. Would you wear a pair of trail boots that did not fit you?” Colt looked at me, perplexed by my interest in his footwear, but there was a point to my question. “How could you face the day knowing the first thing you had to do every morning is

force those big ol' feet into boots not fitted for you? Each and every step you take will be pained by the pinch of those confining boots. It will not matter whether you are working or dancing or strolling in a field of clover; the ache will continue until the sun sets over the ridge and you can slip those miserable boots off your suffering feet. Now, you can continue to shove those boots under the bed and dread the morning, or you can go out and be fitted with a new pair better suited for you."

Colt's eyes grew misty as he recognized himself in my words. He lowered his head. "What are you saying, Hannah?"

"Sometimes, deep in our hearts, we know the life we are walking in doesn't fit. You, and you alone, know if your life fits you, Colt. If it doesn't, you owe it to yourself to slip it off and try on another one."

Colt forced a heavy-hearted smile. "And here I was hoping you would be thrilled at the prospect of me staying here in the Ridge, closer to you. Instead you are encouraging me to go."

"My feelings for you are deep and precious," I said, stroking his cheek. "What I want more than anything is for you to follow your heart. You deserve happiness, Colt."

By the end of the following week, the Yule log had burned to ash. While the turn of the New Year marked the buying and selling of slaves on most plantations, Hillcrest slipped into the quiet routine of winter. The male Runians cut wood and mended fences, while the women were hard at work spinning and weaving. Most of our quilting would be completed during the cold months ahead, so I spent the days sorting through our supplies. With Uncle Mooney and Twitch on their annual trek to the slave auctions in Roanoke, Livie spent the day with James as he worked in the blacksmith shop. Colt appeased his father without compromising his own desire to practice medicine. Instead of traveling all the way to Richmond, he arranged to work with Dr. Waverly in Lows Hollow. The small town of Lows Hollow was less than a half day's ride from Echo Ridge, so Colt could be called home if needed. This satisfied Uncle Mooney and gave Colt his freedom, but with restriction. I wished him a safe journey and warm,

comfortable feet, which made him laugh in spite of his hesitation to bid me farewell.

As I carried rolls of batting to the racks, I heard the back door slam and someone running down the hallway. The look on Livie's face when she burst into the room was frantic.

"How could you do it?" she bellowed at fever pitch.

"What is it, Livie? What's wrong?"

"You told me you didn't sell off yo' slaves. You told me this weren't like other plantations where slaves is bought and sold with no mind to kin and such."

The first thought that came to mind was a conversation I had overheard between Mr. Henderson and Uncle Mooney on Christmas Eve. Mr. Henderson had obvious interest in buying James, but Uncle Mooney insisted he would only hire James out temporarily and at prime wage. I was sickened by the thought, but was aware the business of West Gate was separate and independent from that at Hillcrest.

I went to comfort Livie. "We do not barter away our slaves, but Uncle Mooney—"

"Then why did you sell her? She weren't causin' no trouble."

"Livie, who was sold? Pray tell me, who you are talking about?"

"Fatima!" Livie pushed my hands away and sprayed angry tears. "Winston says she was sent to auction. I believed your tall tales, but your words ain't true. You didn't protect Fatima—you cast her out!" Livie was inconsolable, but I was as stunned as she. As long as I lived at Hillcrest, I had never known a slave to be traded or sold. Having shared a cabin with Fatima, Livie was hit hard. Her pain was compounded by the shock and uncertainty of a broken promise.

I held my hands over my heart as a pledge. "I swear, Livie, I had no idea."

"I hate you white folk. You is mean and heartless and will burn in hell!"

Livie burst into another round of tears and took off through the house. The kitchen door slammed shut before I could move or recover from her words. I was too shaken to cry. The door of the study opened and Aunt Augusta emerged. "What is all the yelling and commotion about? I am calculating figures from our tobacco sales and cannot have my concentration disrupted."

“Why did you sell Fatima?” I snapped.

“Oh,” was Aunt Augusta’s only response.

“Is this my punishment to placate Uncle Mooney?”

“What’s done is done,” she said, as if it was a valid explanation. “It’s for the best.”

“You must always have the final say, even when you are wrong,” I shouted, not caring who heard me. “I hate you!”

I ran out the front door after Livie. I cared not about the threat I was courting. The depth of Livie’s hurt was all that mattered. Outside, a frigid wind howled across the empty yard. I looked in every direction, but Livie was gone.

Chapter 19

*A*n entire day passed with no sign of Livie. When she did not come to the house the following morning, I grew sick with worry, thinking she may have run away. Livie was frightened as much as she was angry—a combination ripe for disastrous decisions. Fear gripped me as well. My heart told me to comb every inch of Mud Run until I found her, but with Aunt Augusta keeping a closer eye on my behavior, I had to be cautious in my movement. Even in my fury over Fatima's fate, I knew antagonizing Aunt Augusta any further would be a grave mistake.

"Elijah, I need you to do something for me," I said, stepping outside the pantry door where he was stacking split logs for Granny Morgan. His woolen jacket was buttoned tight and his cap scrunched down over his brow. Still, his chin shivered when he smiled up at me.

"You want me to go a-poundin' on Livetta's door again, Miz Hannah?"

I pulled my shawl around my shoulders and took his hand. "I want you to tug me toward Mud Run, as if showing me something of importance."

"Like a copperhead snake or a fire that jumped a burning pit?"

"I suppose a small brush fire would require immediate attention," I said, piecing together the plan on a whim. "I just need reason to enter Mud Run."

"Why not jes' walk on down the hill?"

Even with panic jumbling my thoughts, I had to smile at his innocence. "If you play along with me, I would consider it a great favor."

Elijah was happy to oblige me. Much like his father, he considered a private errand for the mistress an honored responsibility. Once in Mud Run, I released him from his duty and he scampered on his way, not the least bit curious about my motive. When I entered Livie's cabin, a brisk wind whistled through the cold room, haunting me with its emptiness.

"Where are you, Livie?" I mumbled anxiously as I sat down on her bed. I guess I had held out hope that I would find her here, sulking in the corner. The sting of Livie's parting words left me wounded. However, I trusted our friendship enough to believe they were not meant for me. I would not fault her for spewing frustrations brought on by injustice. Still, I was concerned

Livie would do something foolish as a result of thinking she had hurt me. When I leaned against the cornhusk sack that served as her pillow, I felt something hard beneath it.

"Your mother's Bible," I gasped with relief. "You would never leave this behind! You cannot have gone far."

"What's that you say, Miz Hannah?" Winston stepped inside the door, clearly alarmed at finding me there. "Who is you talkin' to?"

"No one," I said with the wave of my hand. "I was just, um . . ."

Winston looked over at the cold soot in Livie's fireplace. "Where she at, miz? I been wonderin' why I haven't caught a glimpse of her for de better part of a day."

An understanding glimmer filled his eyes, and I knew I must trust him. "She's disappeared," I blurted out. "She is upset about Fatima, and I fear Aunt Augusta will notice her absence."

Winston swallowed hard. "This is bad, miz. This is mighty bad."

"Please help me cover for her until I can figure out where she has gone."

"I'll do what I can here in de Run," he said, rushing over to spark a fire in her hearth. "Smoke risin' from her chimney will mark her as present, but no slave goes missin' fo' long. Ol' Winston can't fool a paddy roller or hound when a runaway is cornered."

When I returned to the house, I lingered on the front porch, watching for James, who occasionally came up to the stables to check the condition of the work shoes secured on the horses. My heart sank when I remembered he had been hired out for the week to shoe the horses at the Henderson plantation. Their farrier, Casey, lost a finger while replacing a wagon wheel before Christmas, and Uncle Mooney was more than happy to make a little extra money on James's sweat and expertise. His absence troubled me because had he been here on the plantation, Livie would have sought comfort from him and he would have calmed her. My biggest fear was that in her desperation, Livie went looking for him. The Henderson plantation was at least eight miles by wagon, and if she was caught off our property, the repercussions would be unstoppable. Mercy was an unknown entity to slave patrollers.

"Hannalore, what were you doing in the slave quarters?" Aunt Augusta must have seen me through the window and wasted no time in confronting me.

“Elijah alerted me to a brush fire on the hillside. I was the first person he encountered on his search for help.”

“Where is Livetta? She should be with you to offer her assistance. As your personal servant, she is expected to be at your side to intervene in urgent situations.”

“That’s my fault, Miz ’Gusta,” Winston said, appearing unexpectedly from behind me. “With Esther Mae busy in de root cellar, I asked Livetta to fetch my jar of poultice from de cabin. She saw de fire too, and had a bucket o’ water on it before Miz Hannah had to lift a finger. She went to change her drenched wool stockings, but will be back directly. Do you want me to send her yo’ way?”

I held my breath at Winston’s bold bluff.

“That won’t be necessary,” Aunt Augusta uttered after brief hesitation. “As long as you have seen her. I have yet to cross paths with her and was concerned she was shirking her duties. I will be in my room, balancing my accounts, and have no use for meaningless distractions.”

“Yas’sum.” Winston glanced at me like a soldier barely dodging a bullet. “I’ll make sho’ you is not disturbed.”

I grew more frantic upon realizing how easily our charade could unravel. Time was of the essence, and now I had implicated Winston in my scheme. The weather had turned colder and the ring around the yester moon promised snow. With most of the day still ahead of me, I decided to take matters into my own hands. If Livie was not in Mud Run, I tried imagining where she might go for refuge. She was not familiar with the people and surroundings beyond the plantation; therefore, she would not wander far. Suddenly, it occurred to me. *The cave!* Yes, the cave where I first hid her after she had been shot. I should have thought of it sooner.

With Aunt Augusta immersed in financial matters, I was confident I could move without suspicion. I navigated the upper field against the cutting wind, which eased once I penetrated the wooded hillside. Within the harbor of trees, I sprinted up the path toward the peak. I pushed on with frigid air clawing down my throat and burning my lungs. The waters of Emerald Cove were sculpted into frozen perfection, with the exception of a thin line of water trickling down the frosty cliff towering above me. By the time I reached the evergreen hollow, the bleakness that enveloped me prickled my skin with cautious anxiety. Trees staggered and moaned against

the assault of icy gusts whipping across the peak. My heart leapt when I caught a glimpse of shadowed swirls riding the wind. Unsure, I squinted to focus on the air moving across the treetops. There it was again, clearer this time. Gray smoke twirling from the stone ridge. *She's here.*

When I reached the mouth of the cave, I removed my cloak so it would not be dirtied as I crawled in the entrance. Inside the air was moist and cool, but a large blaze in the fire pit threw off a warm glow at the center of the cave. There was no movement except for the lapping flames; however, two ashcakes on a flat rock near the fire told me what I needed to know.

"I know you are here." Livie did not answer, but a soft scuff of feet drew my attention to the far shadows.

"All is fine," I said to reassure her. "You never have to hide from me."

"You alone?" The deep, husky voice of a man shot my heart up into my throat. Fright toppled me backward, stumbling for the cave entrance. In an instant, two large arms clamped around me and dragged me deeper into the cave. My scream echoed off of every wall. I kicked and flailed my arms, desperately trying to break free, only to have the arms clench me tighter. The man bellowed in my ear, but I could not hear him over my own wail. We tangled fiercely, tripping over each other into a heap on the ground. He scrambled on top of me and clamped his hand over my mouth, smothering my cries.

"Stop howlin', girl! I ain't gonna hurt you."

My sight was clouded by terror, but the tired eyes looking down at me hinted at no danger or ill will. They searched me for recognition, and once I stopped screaming, the hand lifted from my mouth.

"It's me," the voice whispered. "Marcus."

"Gracious be."

They were the only two words that burbled from me as we lay there nose to nose. Marcus looked exhausted and panicked, in part because of my unexpected appearance. His face had matured with the shadow of a beard, but his copper eyes grew soft as the warm mist of our breath rolled between us. He shifted off me and rose to his feet. The proper reaction to our physical interaction should have been outrage, but instead I flushed with embarrassment when he offered his hand to help me up.

"Didn't mean to be rough, but you was like a wildcat, girl. You all right?"

I straightened my disheveled dress. “I am fine, but you scared me half to death.”

Marcus chuckled. “I about jumped out o’ my hide right along with you. My heart is still bangin’.”

The shock of the moment finally eased enough for my throat to unclench. “You look different.”

“So do you,” he said.

“Your eyes,” I said, looking beyond their dark gaze and sensing the fortitude within. “Like you’ve seen a dozen years in ten months’ time.”

“There is a lot to see when you is treadin’ new territory. ’Spect the same goes fo’ you. Your eyes is more knowin’ and growed- up since I last looked in ’em.” His plump lips tugged into a half grin. “More alive and shinin’ with gumption.”

He gestured to the flat rock near the fire. Settling in the amber glow, we paused to take stock of each other. He measured me with uncertain eyes, as if determining if the trust we once shared was still intact. It had been nearly a year, and once again I unexpectedly stumbled into his lap when all he wanted was to remain out of sight. I was a threat by virtue of my presence. I, on the other hand, was completely at ease, probably because he crept into my thoughts nearly every day.

“I ain’t afraid o’ much,” he said, his face as vulnerable as a little boy’s. “But I’s scared as a stray pup to ask you this question. What happened to my Livetta?”

“Have you seen her?” I asked hopefully.

“You mean she ain’t round here no more?”

“No . . . I mean, yes,” I fumbled, forgetting Marcus had no clue as to Livie’s fate after he left her in my care. “What I mean to say is, she has been here with me, living at Hillcrest.”

I melted at the joy and relief that brightened his face. I had forgotten how much his protectiveness moved me. A swell of emotion warmed me like finding a long-lost friend. I decided not to alarm him with Livie’s disappearance unless absolutely necessary.

“She’s been doing well, Marcus.” I smiled as the wall between us fell away. “She has been safe and healthy. We tricked my aunt into believing Livie was a gift presented to me by Colt. He drew up false papers.”

I told him about Livie's recovery from her gunshot wound and her time at Hillcrest. He nodded approvingly as I described the caring relationship she found with James, and how he stayed with her after the disappointment of thinking Marcus had returned, only to learn it was a mysterious runaway from West Gate. Marcus leaned closer with great interest.

"What do you mean by *mysterious*?"

"Well, the hounds were sent after him, but I took measures to confuse them in their tracking. The man was not brought back; however, there was no mention of a runaway announced. It was like he never existed."

"Where is this shed you is talkin' about? The one where the slave boy run from."

"It's by the dog pen on the back lot of my uncle's plantation."

Marcus took it in and considered it. "As long as I know Livetta is safe, I don't wanna chance sneakin' around here. The signs ain't right. The deep o' winter is harsh and I gots'ta keep movin'. Only passed this way to find out if she is still here. I'll be back when my journey turns north again." His eyes glimmered with soft appreciation. He reached to touch my arm, then stopped as if being scolded by an inner voice. "Thank you fo' lookin' after her, Miz—"

"Don't." I held up my hand to stop his formality, and accidentally brushed his lips. "Please call me by my name. It's Hannah."

"I remember," he said, letting his words form against my trembling fingertips. I eased my fingers away in sheer terror at how natural it felt. We were both in unfamiliar territory, causing us to hesitate and wonder at each other. A thousand thoughts danced in his eyes, yet he remained where he was, hands at his side.

"You won't never know how much it means to me that you kept yo' promise about Livetta. It was a mighty big risk, and you could o' turned yo' back on the lot of us."

"I do not deserve thanks," I said, humbled by his appreciation. "Since Livie has been here with me, I have been happier than I have been for a very long time. I feel more like the woman I really am, instead of acting the empty role of a girl designed by people I hold no respect for."

This made him smile, connecting us once more. I asked him about his journey north. He was vague and circumspect in the details, not saying how long it took or where, exactly, they ended up. It was clear the trip was long

and hard. Listening to him chronicle the hardships and cruel conditions they navigated, I marveled at the strength and courage he possessed in keeping the group moving north.

“Ol’ Rose gave out and died a few weeks after we left here. Calvin’s heart was so broke after losin’ his mama, he flat refused to go on without her. I don’t know what become of him. Seven more slaves joined up with us along the way. Two was killed when a tree come down during a late-summer thunderstorm. Raizy saved Lillabelle from bein’ swept away as we crossed a rain-swelled creek. Lillabelle’s mama and brother drowned, but Raizy took the shattered chile under her wing.”

“With so much adversity, how did you keep them from giving up?”

“With the truth,” he said with utter conviction. “I tell ’em any journey worth takin’ is gonna be hard and treacherous, ’specially if the path is new and untried. Not everyone will make it. Some don’t even have the gumption or know-how to venture off their massa’s property. I tell ’em the first steps is the hardest ’cuz it is jes’ a beginning. We don’t know fo’ sure where our footsteps will take us, and there is no promise o’ glory in the end. But I remind ’em that a beginning can only take hold if the journey continues. Even when delivered the worst kind of heartache and pain, our footsteps need to keep goin’ forward if we believe in the path we is followin’.”

“In the end, did you find the journey to be worth the risk and effort?”

“Well, the North ain’t the land o’ milk and honey I imagined.” He smiled with a tinge of sadness. “Our journey did not end when we stepped foot on free soil. But it is still a beginning. At least with our arms and legs free of chains, the journey can move forward. When it’s time fo’ me to lay down and die, then the journey will continue with my children, and their children beyond. It’s a promise bridge of the greatest kind.”

Overwhelmed by his vision, I shook my head in wonder. “Is there no end or reward?”

“Does anybody’s journey ever end?” he asked circumspectly. “Or does it continue in those that come from them, both friend and kin?” He paused to collect his thoughts until his face warmed with prideful determination. “Fo’ me, the reward is in the now, knowing a new and special journey has been put in motion because we made sure the beginning took hold by stayin’ strong and puttin’ one foot in front of the other so we can keep movin’ ahead on the path. Most of us stayed together and are settled in the

mountains of Pennsylvania. The horizon ain't much different from here, but the view is a mite prettier when you is lookin' through the eyes of freedom. Even hardships look different when they ain't forced on you by a massa."

Marcus's face was filled with accomplishment and purpose. I was in awe of devotion so strong, it would bring him back into the belly of the beast. He was like no man I ever met. Contentment flowed through me as we sat and talked, although the pleasure was short- lived when it dawned on me that his return would mean Livie's exodus. Or did it?

"Did you say you are venturing south?"

"That's right," he said, offering me an ashcake. I declined and watched him devour it. "I want to bring more folks out if I can."

"Marcus, that's too dangerous."

"I gots'ta," he said, matter-of-fact. "There is folks like me all over the South, cryin' and prayin' to be delivered into freedom and given the chance at a new beginning."

"Why you?" I said, fearful at the risk he was taking. "Coming back for Livie is perilous enough, but at least I understand how a soul can put oneself in jeopardy for someone you love. Why take further risk by going south?"

"Because I know the way." Marcus swallowed what was left of the ashcake and brushed the soot from his hand. "The stars talk to you if you know how to listen, and signs point the way if you know what to look fo'. What kind o' selfish man would I be if used what I know fo' only me and mine?"

His words nudged my heart. "When will you leave?"

"Tonight," he said. "By the light o' the moon."

"What am I to tell Livie?"

Standing and pacing, he considered my question. "Don't tell her I been here and gone. She is hardheaded enough to come lookin' fo' me. It's best if she don't know, 'cuz there is no tellin' how much time will pass befo' I make it back." His eyes grew soft when he looked over at me. "If I get caught or killed, she won't be heartbroke all over again."

"Don't say such an awful thing," I choked out, as he gathered his things into a satchel. However, it was just his way of being practical, so I steadied my emotion. "At least let me bring you some food for your journey."

“I got plenty.” He nodded thankfully as he wrapped a generous portion of cheese and dried beef in a cloth before tucking it with the rest. What a sharp contrast to how ragged and hungry he had been the first time he passed through. Obviously, I was not his only stop along the way. He scuffed dirt over the embers in the pit, snuffing the flame.

“The sun is settin’,” he said with a glance toward the faded orange glint leaking through the gap in the rocks far above. “Ain’t gonna send you off in the dark.” He squeezed my hand gently in his. “I’ll walk you down as far as the tree line, and then I gots’ta be on my way.”

Marcus skillfully led me through the twilight. We did not speak and our hands did not part until we reached the trees bordering the upper field. Once there, he took my other hand as well, letting our fingers intertwine. He turned them up between us as he had the first time we parted when he asked for my promise to care for Livie. This time he asked nothing of me. Ripples of moonlight cascaded across his mahogany skin, revealing tender temptation as he ran his eyes over every curve of my face as if etching it into memory. I tensed with disbelief at the sudden tug between us. As if stung by the same forbidden barb, Marcus burst from me and disappeared into the woods, leaving me breathless within the discerning glare of a full moon.

Chapter 20

I had yet to close my eyes in sleep when a lone rooster offered a distant cry into the predawn stillness surrounding me. I lay staring at the ceiling, torn between thoughts of Marcus and worry for Livie. My encounter with Marcus on the peak left me whirling in confusion. My mind re-created the touch of my fingers on Marcus's lips. How could I willingly allow an intimacy that had always been reserved for Colt? The sensation was different from anything I had ever known. Perhaps time had made Colt too familiar to stir the same unexpected pull in me. A dormant part of me had been awakened. It thrilled and terrified me from every side

Guilt washed over me, but nothing pained me as much as the thought of Livie being gone. Restless anxiety drove me from my bed to dress and await the rebirth of the sun. I had to find her before day's end, even if I had to comb the mountainside in outright disobedience of Aunt Augusta's command to conduct myself as a proper lady. I would address the consequences as they came to me.

"Land sakes, Miz Hannah," Granny Morgan said as I pushed open the door of the kitchen. "Why is you up wit' de chickens? Let me get some biscuits in de oven fo' you."

"No rush, Granny. My appetite remained in bed this morning."

I hurried from the kitchen before Granny could protest, and before Esther Mae came in from the woodshed to scrutinize my actions. I went to the hall closet and retrieved my woolen cloak. When I opened the front door, a burst of frigid air rushed over me, so I lowered my head and marched forth, closing the door without sound.

Once I was outside, it occurred to me that I had not organized a plan for my search. It required me to be efficient and discreet; therefore, rather than plow ahead, I went across the yard to the carriage house, where I could seek shelter from the elements while collecting my thoughts. I was relieved when Winston was not inside doing his chores. It gave me time to look around, even though I was certain the carriage house would be a poor choice for staying out of sight. My instincts proved correct, but as I poked

around, I thought of dozens of other places on or near the plantation where Livie could take refuge, and I was encouraged.

I was drawn from the carriage house by the rattle of wagon wheels along the road halving the lower fields. Through the mist, I could make out the figure of a man perched on a buckboard. Where the road dipped, he slipped out of sight, but when the wagon rolled up over the hill I was surprised to see the anxious face of James. He slowed the horses and steered them to where I stood.

"James," I said, not sure what to make of his appearance.

"Mornin', miz." He glanced around, as if expecting to see someone else. He climbed down from the wagon and came to me, lowering his voice. "I got somethin' o' yorn in the back o' my wagon."

"Livie?" I whispered as my heart stuttered in my chest. I was washed with relief when he answered with a quick nod.

"She showed up at the Henderson place yesterday. She was scared, so she come lookin' fo' me. She nearly got caught by a passel of paddy rollers. Don't know how she found her way, she jes' kept wanderin' until she found me. She is sorry she run off."

"By the grace of God, Winston and I are the only ones who know she is gone. I have been sick with worry."

"Praise be," James mumbled as his tight shoulders eased. "I thought the dogs would be trackin' her by now. Take mercy on her, miz. She knows she talked out o' turn against you."

"I am not angry with her, James. It was a horrible misunderstanding. You were right to bring her to me. She is safe here. I fear you have been put at great risk by leaving the Henderson property."

James reached in the pocket of his jacket and took out a folded slip of paper. "I got a proper pass to be off the plantation. I figured the only way to get Livetta back here was to bring her myself, so I broke off the edge of Massa Henderson's ax head. He sent me out before sunup to fetch one o' mine from the blacksmith shop. Truth is, I got mine there in the wagon, but he didn't know it."

The mound of burlap that concealed Livie shifted in the wagon. "Thank you, James. Your forethought and swift action prevented a catastrophe."

"I best get back before Marse Twitch or Willy Jack set their sights on me. Pass or no pass, they will whup me if I lose a mornin' of work."

I looked at the open carriage-house door. “When you turn your wagon around, back far enough into the carriage house for Livie to jump out unseen. The Runians will be stirring soon, so she will be able to move about and come to the house without notice.”

James nodded and placed his hat back on his head.

“And, James,” I said before he turned away. “Let Livie know how happy I am she is home.”

I collapsed on my bed, exhausted from lack of sleep and inner turmoil. Livie was home, and my overturned world was righted once more. My wrung-out emotional state told me I had been more afraid of Livie’s fate than I had admitted to myself. I drifted in and out of sleep until a light tap on my door awoke me. The door cracked open and there stood Livie, shaken and unsure. I ran to her and wrapped her in a tight embrace.

“Don’t you ever scare me like that again,” I said, and sniffled with relief.

Livie clung to me with regret. “I’s sorry I struck out at you when Fatima was taken away. I know you didn’t have no part in her bein’ sold off. My mouth started spoutin’ before my head could catch up. I figured I ruined it between us when I said I hate white folk.”

“Expressing your honest emotion, even anger, will never ruin the bond between us, Livie. We are friends, and friends sometimes disagree or make mistakes. You were upset about Fatima. I understand completely. I knew when you recovered from the shock, you would trust me enough to know I would never take part in such a thing.”

“Guess we really is friends fo’ sure,” she said wiping the back of her hand across her eyes. “Ain’t that a kick in the behind to a stubborn mule like me.”

Our tension gave way to giggles, releasing the pressure of the last few days. We were aware of how different the outcome could have been if Livie had been caught away from the plantation. So we found extra pleasure in our blessed reunion. All the while, the thought of Marcus tugged at the back of my mind. I ached to tell Livie her brother was alive, and confide in her about our interaction in the cave. However, just as friends can disagree and make mistakes, friends can also protect. Therefore, I decided to abide by Marcus’s wish of not telling her about his visit. I eased my guilt by praying twice as fervently for his safe and swift return. But Livie deserved more. I also wanted to give her hope to hang on to now that I knew Marcus was

alive. I retrieved his neckerchief hidden in my wardrobe closet and pressed it gently in her hand.

“Where did you find this? I thought the river stole it from me.”

“I found it on the riverbank the night you swam off.”

Livie touched it to her face and breathed in the scent of her brother.

“He will come back, Liv. I believe with all my heart and soul that Marcus will return for you before summer has come and gone.” The half-truth pained me, but the smile my words brought to her face gave me peace.

Livie and I settled into our normal routine by evening. I joined Aunt Augusta for supper. As was my expectation, she did not comment on my scarcity over the last few days, nor did she seem to care. Her detachment was a stroke of good fortune with regard to Livie. Aunt Augusta did not give her a second glance when she came to collect the dishes.

“Colonel Richards arranged for his cousin to come for an extended visit for the remainder of the winter months. He arrived yesterday, and after a few days with the colonel, he will come to stay with us while he tutors you in the French language.”

I set my teacup down and huffed. “I am no longer a child, Aunt Augusta. Perhaps you should consult with me before making arrangements on my behalf.”

“What has gotten into you Hannalore? I have indulged your independent streak of late, but I caution you not to push me too far.”

I pouted as a way of not giving in completely to her, but some battles were not worth fighting. At the very least, it would pass the hours until spring. The winter months were dreary and unending, so between the quilting and French lessons, hopefully the days that stretched toward spring would pass quickly.

I retired with Livie to my room. Not having slept the previous night, I looked forward to slipping on my nightgown and crawling under the covers. Livie busied herself with straightening and dusting the room. I told her not to bother, because it had been a long day for both of us. I sensed her stalling. I was pleasantly surprised when she got on her knees and pulled out the trundle bed.

“Can I sleep here with you tonight?”

“Of course, Livie.” I crawled down to sit next to her. “I love when you stay with me, talking late into the night like sisters. Living in the cabin was

your idea."

"It's good fo' me to be amongst my own. The folk in the Run is family to me now, but with Fatima gone, the cabin is a mite lonesome. It be different when James is back." Livie scrunched her face in bashful grin. "James has been visitin' me in my cabin at night."

"Livie!" I squealed, both embarrassed and excited. "How long has this been going on?"

"Started durin' Big Times. We been growin' close and feelin' special."

"I knew it," I giggled. "I told Mar—" I choked and coughed to cover the slip of the tongue that almost had me speaking Marcus's name.

Livie patted me on the back and eyed me curiously. "You all right?"

"Yes, yes, I am fine," I said, clearing my throat. "What I was trying to say was, I told myself you have been looking quite smitten with James."

"He asked me to be his wife." Livie's smile was broad and proud. "I nearly scared the life out o' him when I showed up at the Henderson plantation. He said, 'Livetta, I don't know what's gonna come o' this, but the notion of losin' you makes my heart start hurtin' awful, so if we gets out o' this alive, I'm taking you fo' my wife if you want me fo' your husband.' He is gonna ask Massa Reynolds fo' his say-so when he gets back." Livie reached over and took my hands. "And I is askin' fo' your say-so now. Can James and me jump the broom?"

"You do not need to ask for my permission," I gushed. "But you have my wholehearted blessing. I am so happy for you, Livie." I gave her a hug and rested my head on her shoulder. We had truly become women, she and I, with the wants and desires of women. "What is it like, Livie?"

"What?"

"Being with a man."

Livie gasped at my forthright question, then covered her face with bashful hesitation. When she lowered her hands, her face gleamed with contentment. "I thought it would be strange," she sighed. "From the time I was knee-high, it was a fearful thing the massa could force onto you. But when lovin' is between you, it makes you feel alive and a part o' each other. Like you is givin' each other something of yo'self that no one else can have. Words 'tain't big enough to describe it. You won't rightly understand it till you feel the fire." Livie yawned and leaned back against the bed as her exhaustion finally caught up with her.

I had hoped Livie’s step into womanhood would bring some clarity to my own conflicting emotions. However, it only raised more questions. The joy in having her back at my side lifted my worries and inspired me to seek similar contentment for her.

Tomorrow, I will speak to Uncle Mooney about coupling James and Livie. Even if he makes me crawl on my knees and beg, I shall gladly do it for the sake of my friend’s happiness.

Chapter 21

"Out of the question," Uncle Mooney grumbled, shoveling his buttered grits into his mouth. "I will not pair my prime buck with one of your stock. I have perfectly good breeders of my prime own."

"Hear me out, Mooney, before you dig in your heels." Aunt Augusta was cool and calculating in her presentation. I was surprised at her interest in Livie's desire to marry James, especially when she offered to accompany me and speak on my behalf in securing permission from Uncle Mooney. Now her motive was revealed. There was investment to be gained and negotiated. Both of them were greedy to the bone. However, having Aunt Augusta in my corner was definitely to my advantage, so I let her speak. My only concern was finding a way for James and Livie to be together.

"We all know you have attempted to couple James a number of times over the years, to no avail. You beat and punish him each time the coupling proves miserable and childless. I have never witnessed a slave go through the silly ritual of jumping over the broom as often as he has, only to end up undoing it with a backward jump after a year's time. Each failed attempt has left him a little less content and more of a loner. He is of odd stock, and if not for the profit he generates for you with his skills, you would have put him on the block long ago." Augusta shook her head and laughed. "The money you make from me alone on surcharges for his service makes him worth his keep."

Uncle Mooney pushed away his empty plate and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "So, what is your point, Augusta? You are not telling me anything I don't already know. In fact, I took great pleasure in denying James's request when he came to me upon his return to the plantation this afternoon. I may not have whipped the stubbornness out of him, but I as sure as hell will not reward it. Besides, what is the gain for me in allowing such an arrangement?"

"The gain will be in James's productivity and loyalty," she said, leaning forward to emphasize her words. "You and I have always disagreed on this point, but I believe it is to our benefit to maintain a slave's physical and

emotional well-being. Contented and devoted slaves give more of themselves than those who are beaten and deprived."

Uncle Mooney waved his hand in disgust. "That's the woman in you talking. Your profits would double if you were not throwing away good money on extra clothing and food rations twice a year."

"Watch your tone, Mooney." Aunt Augusta was undaunted by his attempt to dismiss her. "We are family, as well as business partners, and this is a viable proposition. I believe you are the stubborn one in this scenario."

A patronizing grin curdled his face. He crossed his legs and leaned an elbow on the table, successfully disengaging Aunt Augusta and angling his attention to where I sat watching the banter between them.

"Why am I wasting my time arguing points of view with your aunt? You are the one I should be negotiating with, my dear. The wench belongs to you; therefore, it is our discussion."

He was smug and superior in his demeanor. I doubted he had an interest in what I had to say, but he enjoyed making me squirm for his approval. Denying me in the end would be his revenge for Fatima. I was not clever in the ways of business, so I simply spoke the truth.

"James and Livie love each other," I said evenly. "I want them to be happy."

Uncle Mooney exploded in laughter, spewing spittle, peppered with grits, through the air. "Augusta," he snorted, "how could a woman as intelligent and practical as you raise such a naive, foolish girl? She wants them to be happy. As if they feel love and attachment like you or I. Only the overactive imagination of a sheltered child would entertain such a notion."

He pinched my cheek with placating amusement. I pushed his hand away, my reserve replaced with contempt. I wanted to grab him by his muttonchops and yank the smirk off his face, but instead I remained composed and focused on the business at hand. Although he presented himself as disinterested, Uncle Mooney's posturing told me it was not hopeless. Once his laughter subsided, he stroked his chin and eyed me sideways.

"Since this means a great deal to you, and as Augusta says we are family, I shall offer you a generous compromise." He got up and walked to the window with his hands behind his back, seemingly mulling over a difficult

decision. After a moment, he turned back to me, his arms folded in strategic defense.

“I shall grant the request for James and your wench to be paired as husband and wife on the condition that I retain rights and ownership of any offspring produced from the union.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Aunt Augusta interjected, before the words barely left his lips. “As the mother goes, so goes the child. That is the way of it, Mooney. Ownership of the mother includes any forthcoming children.”

“This is a business deal, Augusta,” he said, removing parchment and steel-nib pen from the top drawer of a desk in the corner. “And these are my terms.”

“Never!” Aunt Augusta huffed as Uncle Mooney dipped his pen into the inkwell and began writing. “You are strong-arming the child.” Aunt Augusta’s face was taut with distress, unmasking a vulnerability in her I had never seen. My instincts were keen enough to know that Uncle Mooney’s cooperation was a ruse. The same instincts told me not to be moved by Aunt Augusta’s alarm, because her motivation was no different from Uncle Mooney’s. What they did not know was that none of it mattered. I did not legally own Livie, so any agreement I struck, on paper or otherwise, would be worthless. Therefore, his attempt at cleverness amused me.

“I am not strong-arming anyone. She is a grown woman who is capable of making decisions on her own behalf. Isn’t that right, Hannalore?”

Uncle Mooney’s manipulation was so transparent it was laughable. Was it my youth and inexperience, or simply the fact that I was a woman leading him to believe I was foolish enough to be swayed by his antics? I looked over at Aunt Augusta, who shook her head, commanding me to decline. Uncle Mooney, on the other hand, continued to charm me with words as sweet as sugar cubes used to coax an anxious colt back into the fold. However, I was not taking the bait.

“No,” I stated firmly. “This is not a business arrangement. I simply want permission for James to marry Livie.”

“Don’t be so sentimental. Of course it’s a business deal.”

“I will allow them to share the back cabin on my property,” Aunt Augusta counteroffered smoothly. “It is the cabin where Livetta is living now. We will provide James with food rations and clothing, as we do for the entirety of Mud Run. A good deal for you, Mooney, in that I will provide

for James' needs while he and his earnings remain yours. He will continue to work between the two plantations as he does at present."

"Your cooperation and generosity are uncharacteristic, Augusta. There must be more you want from this arrangement."

"Since I will have financial investment in James, I think it appropriate for any offspring of the couple to remain in our possession. There is profit for both of us in such an agreement."

"Here is my final offer," he huffed in frustration. "And a compromise I will not negotiate. I will grant permission for the union and the living arrangements you describe. I will halve the charges you incur for James' service at your plantation. However, ownership of any children born of them will be split between us. I shall have rights and ownership to all male children, and you shall have rights to all female children."

"I would never agree to such an offer," Aunt Augusta snapped. "It's outrageous."

"The offer is being made to Hannalore," he said, smiling at me. "It is simply paperwork ensuring James' loyalty to me. They will all be living in Mud Run together as a family, no matter who holds the paper. I believe I am being quite generous. My dear, this is the only agreement I will consider. Accept it or refuse it, it matters not to me."

All I could think of was Livie's heartbreak should I return to tell her the union was forbidden. Aunt Augusta was right. The deal Uncle Mooney offered was unreasonable, but there was no doubt in my mind it was indeed the only arrangement he would allow. It gave him the upper hand over me, which avenged me having revealed his indiscretions with Fatima. He had no idea the paper he was drawing up was based on fictitious ownership. If playing along with this formality satisfied him and opened the door for Livie's happiness, it was an easy decision. Still, even the pretense of bargaining away my best friend's children rolled heavily in my breast. It reminded me how far at odds I had become with a world where this practice was an everyday occurrence.

"I shall accept your offer," I stated confidently.

Not knowing the secret of Livie's ownership, Aunt Augusta gasped with disbelief. "Hannalore, I beg you to reconsider. It is a grave error in judgment."

Uncle Mooney pushed the paper toward me. “She is not your puppet, Augusta. In fact, she is better educated than you and I put together. Hannalore will leave here with the permission she came seeking. Her interests are served.”

The contract was written exactly as he had stated. Confident the agreement was worthless by law, I dipped the nib of the pen in the inkwell and scribbled my name. When it was done, I looked to Aunt Augusta, expecting her icy eyes to pierce me in anger for disobeying her wishes. Instead, her head drooped to one side, but not before I saw her eyes flutter with the weight of moisture brimming across her lashes. Unfortunately, the ink dried quicker than the tears, and I instantly regretted my decision.

Chapter 22

By the time our carriage rolled into the long shadows that stretched across the yard leading to our front porch, the sun was sinking behind us into the hollows of West Gate. Aunt Augusta remained silent on what had transpired. Her eyes were fixed straight ahead on the carriage ride back to Hillcrest. She ignored the hand Winston offered as she exited the carriage, and his stiffened knees broke into a hurried stride as he hobbled to reach the door of the house and open it for her without delay. Elijah came from the barn to secure the team until Winston returned. I then sent Elijah down the hill to summon James and Livie. I waited on the porch to announce the news. I expected Livie to shriek with joy when I told her she and James were to be married. However, my words were met with an anxious smile of relief.

"Aren't you thrilled, Liv?" I asked, somewhat baffled by her restrained reaction. "I believe I am more excited than you."

Livie reached for my hand and squeezed it tight. "I am as happy as fear allows me to be."

"Fear?"

"It's hard on a heart waitin' fo' someone else to decide what I can or can't have in my life. 'Specially when the bits of joy we carve out fo' ourselves can be snatched away faster than a drop of rain soaked up by a dusty road."

"I would never allow anyone to hurt you," I reassured her.

"I know my heart is safe with you," Livie said with much trepidation. "But lovin' James gives Massa Reynolds and Marse Twitch the means to whip and beat me. Not outright and physical, 'cuz Massa don't hold my papers. But through my man's well-bein', my heart is at their mercy too."

I had never considered the ramifications and vulnerability the slaves endured with even the simplest and purest of life's gifts. The heart and thoughts of a slave are beyond a master's command, but they can be turned on them as cruel weapons through assault and denial, or in its worst form,

instant and permanent separation. There is no dream of happily ever after in the quarters.

As quickly as her thoughts darkened, Livie's typical resolve returned. She lifted her chin and unleashed a smile. "That's the way of it." She shrugged. "There's no point broodin' over it. The way I sees it, James keeps both these plantations runnin' with the work he does in the blacksmith and carpenter shop. Massa Reynolds makes a fine profit when he hires out James to other planters fo' a spell. Massa ain't fool enough to do harm to James. We be fine."

James put his arm around her and pulled her tight. During the time of their acquaintance, I watched Livie mature into womanhood, while James shed his stoic shell and reconnected with the world around him. The embrace they shared reaffirmed my confidence in the intervention I made on their behalf. Happiness glowed from them. I saw no need to outline the meaningless details of the arrangement struck with Uncle Mooney. It would likely cause more anxiety and misunderstanding.

Livie released my hand and took James' elbow. "Do you mind if I walk back with James so we can tell the folks in the Run our good news? Nothin' like a weddin' to set the quarters abuzz."

I beamed with pleasure at the excitement taking hold of Livie. "Take all the time you need. In fact, it is not necessary to come back to the house tonight."

"I'll be up later." Livie smiled as she pressed a hand to her breast. "So I can hug you and thank you fo' makin' it possible fo' James and me to marry up. Can't do it proper out here in the open."

"Yas'sum, Miz Hannah," James said with an appreciative nod. "We is obliged fo' you softenin' Massa Reynolds' opinion on the idea." They looked at each other with intimate tenderness, then walked away, the picture of contentment, as Livie leaned into James and rested her head on his shoulder.

The next day when news of the pending union spread through Mud Run, Aunt Augusta continued to distance herself from the activity. With only two weeks until the wedding, Granny Morgan gathered ribbon and bows for the traditional broomstick ceremony common in the slave quarters. As matriarchal leader of the Runians, Granny took great pride in overseeing

such occasions, and although the act of jumping the broom was quick and simple, the meaning and celebration attached to it was revered.

The levity that enveloped the house and grounds was like a breath of fresh air, until a stranger appeared at Hillcrest, arriving in a polished plum brougham pulled by a sleek charcoal stallion. His arrival was unannounced, but Aunt Augusta summoned me to join her in the foyer, where she stood to greet the visitor as Winston opened the door. The stranger's cloak and hat were as sleek and dark as the horse snorting in the yard. He was a ruddy gentleman, perhaps a decade of age beyond me, with small, glassy eyes crowding the crest of a long, thin nose that was much too large for his face. His profile was punctuated by a sharp ridge that hooked the protrusion downward toward tight thin lips. The skin on his cheeks and chin was chafed and flaking, its reddened coarseness a natural state not brought on by wind or winter exposure. The line of his face was reminiscent of a snapping turtle's snout, and his arrogant demeanor suggested he had the same vicious bite. It is amazing how quickly we can draw a conclusion about a person

The stranger removed his oversized top hat and jerked his head forward in a stiff partial bow. "Madame Reynolds, it is indeed a pleasure."

Aunt Augusta took my elbow and guided me in his direction. "Monsieur Charbonneau, allow me to introduce to you my niece, Hannalore. She will be a conscientious student under your direction."

I paused before fully extending my hand. "Have we met previously, sir? Your name rings familiar."

"No, I have never had the pleasure," he said, reaching toward me. I flushed an equal mix of anger and embarrassment as he eagerly took my hand and pressed his terse mouth to my flesh. "I come to you with great anticipation, Mademoiselle Blessing. My dear cousin the colonel recommended you quite highly, and you are as *magnifique* as the portrait he painted in my mind."

"Pardon me for my dismay, Monsieur Charbonneau," I said, retrieving my hand from his. "However, I am ambivalent in the matter of my education in the French language, since it was presented to me as a chore rather than a choice."

"Please call me Lamond," he said, looking about with an air of conceit. "My experience tells me that most young ladies are ill equipped to discern that education is a privilege. As a favor to my cousin, I cleared my schedule

from now until the conclusion of the summer months, so I can not only share my expertise in the gentle lilt of the French language, but also partake in an extended respite in the quiet and simple way of life here in the Virginia hills."

"Monsieur Charbonneau will stay in the guest room during his sojourn with us," Aunt Augusta said with an arch of the eyebrow, cautioning me to mind my manners. "Winston, see that Monsieur Charbonneau's trunks are taken to his room so he can freshen up. Then direct Esther Mae to serve us tea in the parlor at half past the hour."

So with no regard to my opinion or objections, it was decreed that I was now the student of Monsieur Lamond Charbonneau. Surprisingly, it was not as burdensome as I had first feared. Lamond did not rise with the sun, as was the natural way for those accustomed to life on the plantation. He lumbered down the stairs well after Aunt Augusta and I had finished breakfast and moved on to other activities. I generally joined Tessie in the quilting room to stitch squares until Lamond knocked on the door to signal me into the parlor for the day's lesson. By midweek it became our ritual, and although Esther Mae grumbled a time or two about Lamond and his "city folk" ways, it was a routine of little demand on me.

My lessons were interesting, but served no true purpose other than to add to my refinement. However, they filled a void in my day left by Livie's absence. As my personal attendant, Livie was usually at my side from sunup to sundown, except for when the chores of the household required her to assist Esther Mae. Although she would never ask it of me, I knew she would be grateful for some free time to ready her cabin for her soon-to-be husband. So in the days since the union was approved, Livie slipped away, with my encouragement, to attend to her private chores in Mud Run. Livie continued to come to my room just after dawn to fill my basin and help me dress, although the time was generally passed with us chatting on my bed. When breakfast was served, Livie would leave without notice and often did not return until dusk. With a guest in the house, it was an easy charade to pass off on Aunt Augusta. Near the end of Lamond's first week at Hillcrest, Livie lingered longer with me during her morning visit.

"I don't need to go back down the hill today," Livie proclaimed as we settled at the foot of my bed. "Everything is fine and ready fo' James. He been workin' late into the night after his chores is done, buildin' a bed fit

fo’ two. Winston got say- so from Miz ’Gusta fo’ some straw, so Esther Mae and me stuffed a fine mattress.”

“One week from today, you will be a married woman.” I took Livie’s hand and pulled her to her feet. “Come with me. I have a surprise for you.”

I led her to the door of the wardrobe and swung it wide, shedding light on the line of dresses that hung neatly within. “I want you to choose any dress and it will be yours, a gift from me.”

Livie’s eyes doubled in size, then moistened with emotion. “The likes o’ me ’tain’t fit fo’ somethin’ so fine.”

I took her in my arms and squeezed her tight. “You are the finest woman I know, so do not ever talk like you are anything less than the best.” Livie patted my back and allowed me a moment to cling to her. She may have sensed that amid my joy for her, I was also fearful our relationship would change as she created a family of her own. I stepped back with a gleeful clap of my hands.

“Now do as I ask, and choose any dress you like.”

“Jes’ makin’ it possible fo’ James and me to marry up is gift enough. No need fo’ nothin’ more.” Livie hemmed and hawed while her eyes danced over the colors and styles spread before her.

“Don’t be silly, Liv. I have given you dresses in the past.”

“But they was everyday, in-and-out-the-house dresses. These are fanciful and special.”

“Exactly,” I said, nudging her toward the closet for a closer look. “A special dress for a special occasion.”

I pulled dresses from the closet and held them under her chin until she gasped at her reflection. “See how this chiffon makes your eyes sparkle?”

“Look at me,” she said, spinning in front of the looking glass. “I look like a princess goin’ to a ball.” She tossed it on the bed and tried another.

I rushed to the chair at my vanity and coaxed her to sit. “Come, Liv, let me fix your hair.” Her thick tufts softened beneath my brush as I stood behind her, roles reversed, stroking her hair.

Livie shook in a fit of laughter as I struggled to wrangle her belligerent hair into two braids from front to back. “Don’t bother tryin’ to tame it. It’s ornery, like me,” she giggled. “Besides, the braids make me look like a little girl.” I smiled and nodded, feeling so close to her that I could read her mind.

“I have the perfect alternative.” I shuffled through the drawer of my wardrobe and presented her with a cranberry chenille scarf. I wrapped it neatly around her head and tucked her hair beneath it so her striking face was framed in its brilliance.

“When did I get so pretty?” she said, spellbound by the womanly transformation.

I pressed my cheek to hers. “It’s about time you see what I have seen all along.”

I had never enjoyed or appreciated these possessions until this moment of sharing them with Livie. Her admiration gave them value in my eyes, much like her caring devotion had given me a sense of worth once lost within me. Oh, how powerful the impact of love and friendship. They were Livie’s gifts to me and far more valuable than anything hanging in my closet. Livie’s aura reflected beauty in everything she tried on, but when I pulled an ivory satin gown up over her shoulders, her eyes lit up.

“Livie, it is perfect,” I said, stepping back in amazement. “Here, let me paint your lips and powder your face.” Caught up in the moment, it did not occur to me what would happen when I dusted her cheeks. The light shade of my face powder smudged her cheeks white. I quickly wet my fingertips to rub it off, only to smear it more deeply. Livie’s expression sank as she looked at her pale likeness draped in silk and lace. She grabbed a facecloth to cleanse her skin.

“Who are we foolin’? This is not me. James would never know me under a pile o’ frills and silly ornaments. He would turn tail and run if he see’d me dressin’ up white.”

“I am sorry, Livie. My exuberance spoiled the moment. I was not trying to change who you are or masquerade you as white.”

“Don’t be sorry. We was jes’ having fun wit’ the idea,” she said, sheepishly peeling off the gown. “But we both know I can’t never wear such a dress.”

I wanted to cry out in protest, but there was no denying the harsh truth she spoke. I could want and wish a lot of things for Livie, but I did not have the power to make it so. Livie blinked back a crest of tears rising in her eyes as she folded the dress and handed it back to me. There were no words to ease our letdown, so we picked up my scattered gowns and closeted them away where they were meant to remain. Livie slipped her gingham dress

back on and paused next to the looking glass to adjust the chenille scarf still making her face radiate. I put my arms around her.

“Your beauty remains unchanged to me. You do not need silk and lace to be a princess. It’s a power from within.” I reached over and tucked a straying coil of hair beneath her scarf. “I like the head wrap; it’s simple yet stunning.”

“It’s the only crown I’m meant to wear,” she said, tilting her head to examine her deflated reflection. “And a fitting headdress fo’ a woman to wear on her wedding day.” We exchanged a bittersweet smile at knowing we had lost a bit of innocence we would never regain.

By the time I hurried downstairs, Aunt Augusta had taken her last bite of breakfast. “Pardon me for being late,” I offered before Aunt Augusta could scold me. However, she did not appear displeased as she stirred a spoonful of honey into her tea.

“Granny left you warm biscuits and gravy,” she said, gesturing to the domed silver platter in place at the center of the table. “I have business at the bank. Therefore Winston will drive me into town later. Esther Mae indicates we are in need of some household goods, so she will accompany me to the mercantile as well.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Granny Morgan will have Livetta serve tea during Esther Mae’s absence this afternoon. I shall return in time to have supper with you and Lamond tonight.”

“As you wish, Aunt Augusta.”

Soon after Aunt Augusta departed, I made my way to the sewing room in the back corner of the house. There was a rear entrance used by the Runians who were summoned for their quilting expertise, so there was already a passel of women at work when I entered the windowless room. The winter months provided us with extra hands usually kept busy in the fields throughout the tobacco season. Aunt Augusta was of the popular opinion there was no idle time on a thriving plantation. Winter was the season of repair and preparation. Worn tools and wagons were fixed, fences mended, and necessities like cornhusk brooms and baskets were diligently produced while snow blanketed the hibernating acreage.

With Fatima gone, Tessie rose to head seamstress and all the fine clothing of the household was made under her hand or supervision. All other sewing

was done by firelight in the cabins, using castoffs of the main house. The few selected to engage in the quilting were chosen by Esther Mae and required Aunt Augusta's approval. I supposed this was because of the access they were given to the house, even though it was only this one room and back door. I enjoyed the social community of the sewing room, although I was aware it was more restrained when I was present. Livie joined us a short time later, and much of the morning passed before Lamond's impatient knock signaled me to bid my leave and join him for the day's lesson in the parlor.

In the presence of others, Lamond floated with an air of grandiose self-importance. Alone with me, he had become a bit boyish and flirtatious. Nothing inappropriate or lascivious, but considering our age difference, I found it disconcerting. Colt did not like Lamond, and was suspicious of his character since their introduction. Colt had been back on the plantation less than a week, summoned home to aid in a small outbreak of dysentery in the West Gate quarters. He made it his business to discreetly inquire about Lamond's background with those who were familiar with the colonel's family. Within days, Colt learned Lamond had fallen under the spell of liquor for several years, and after an embarrassing incident regarding a house of ill repute, his family cut him off from their money until he conquered his demons and regained his status as a gentleman. Supposedly cured, Lamond came to Echo Ridge in part to rebuild his reputation and to put enough distance between him and Asheville to ensure his charade go unquestioned.

"You appear distracted today, Mademoiselle," Lamond said, wagging his finger at me. "The French language is not meant to be sputtered word by word. It should ooze from you like a seductive melody. Here, feel how it rolls in my throat." He took my hand and pressed it against the fleshy knot that bobbed beneath his chin when he spoke.

"*Je suis enchanté,*" he repeated in a hoarse whisper. "Do you feel it?"

"Yes, I feel it, Lamond." I grew uneasy and attempted to retrieve my hand. However, he was not ready to part with it, and continued to paw at it with his sweaty palms.

"I am quite serious, Hannalore. You enchant me. Your beauty incites an earnest need deep within. . . ."

He released my hand when the doorknob rattled. He sat with his back to the door, so when he flushed, I realized he thought Aunt Augusta had returned. For me, the sight of Livie entering the room was a heavenly reprieve. She carried a tea service, complete with porcelain cups and a matching pot framed by a neatly arranged plate of almond scones. Amused by my welcoming face, Livie struggled to maintain a flat expression as she moved around Lamond to position the service on the rosewood table between him and me. Lamond did not acknowledge her presence, but midsentence, his remarks had shifted from personal to professorial without so much as a hitch or a stammer.

He lifted a book from his lap and read a passage to me in French. His absorption in the language allowed me to give Livie a devilish grin as she bent to place the tea service on the table. Biting her lip to restrain a grin, Livie glanced from me to Lamond. Instantly, her entire body jerked. The movement jostled the teacups back and forth with tinkling disarray as the pieces bounced against one and other. Livie threw one hand over the pot and cups to steady them, and when she did so, the tray slipped from her grasp and crashed at our feet. Livie dropped to her knees, frantically gathering shards of porcelain in her hands and tossing them onto the tray where it had fallen next to the table.

“I’s sorry, Miz Hannah,” she said in a subservient voice I didn’t recognize. “I’s jes’ a fumblin’ fool. I’ll clean this mess up rightly. I’s so sorry, miz.”

“You clumsy wench,” Lamond boomed as he kicked the tray across the room, causing Livie to cry out and shrink to one side.

“Lamond, stop it,” I said, jumping between him and Livie. “It was an unfortunate slip of the hand. That’s all!”

Still on her hands and knees, Livie scrambled across the floor with her head bowed low and retrieved the tray. Her bent frame convulsed as she brushed the broken cups into a pile. Blood trickled from a cut on her hand, mixing crimson with the puddle of tea surrounding her. All the while she kept uttering, “I’s sorry, sah. Jes’ slipped, is all.”

“Quit blabbering or I shall kick your teeth into more cracked pieces than those damn cups.”

“Step back, Lamond!” I burst out, yanking the lapel on his jacket. “This is not your concern.”

Lamond's face bulged eggplant purple as I intercepted his fury. He stormed toward the window, bellowing about my "soft hand with coloreds." Livie kept her head down until I moved close enough to shield her from Lamond's sight. She looked up at me with doomed terror heaving in every breath. She mouthed a barely audible whisper.

"It's young Massa!"

"Lamond?" Shock and disbelief twisted inside me. "He's your master?"

"Massa Charbonneau's boy has come lookin fo' me. I's as good as dead."

I reached down and discreetly touched her cheek, although my trembling hand offered little reassurance for her or for me. "Don't panic," I whispered. "Keep your face turned away while I get him out of the room."

Nerves set my skin ablaze, but with two calming breaths I willed a cool facade to overtake the wildfire of fear that scorched in me. I turned and moved toward Lamond, hoping my body would serve to obstruct his focus on Livie.

"Let's move to the dining room, Lamond. Granny Morgan will serve tea and we can continue with our lesson." Desperation had me batting my eyes at him. "I would like to learn more about the seductive melody of the French language." To my dismay, his mood had soured.

"Women lack the wherewithal to strike fear into their darkies. Lend me the use of a whip. I will take this one out back and teach her a lesson in the proper way to serve her mistress."

"It's truly not necessary, Lamond. She is ashamed and regretful. There is no purpose in demanding more."

Lamond snorted with impatience. "Demand more and get more. It is the only hope of wringing all you can from these ignorant creatures. Each lash of the whip reminds them their fate is in our hands. There are no accident, only shortcomings. Every shortcoming needs to be met with a greater punishment for there to be improvement in the breed. Hell, a good dose of punishment, even when it's not warranted, keeps them cowering and desperate to please."

His dry lips curled under the hook of his nose, obviously amused by a thought in his abhorrent mind. "I remember one of the house wenches who served my father and stepmother. As I recall, her name was Willow. My stepmother was a harsh and ghastly woman who knew how to handle her darkies. She despised Willow, but the wench was a wonderful cook. Once,

when I was a month short of my twelfth birthday, I stole Father's pipe and hid behind our barn for my first smoke of tobacco. By the time Willow called me for supper, I was green to the gills from puffing on that ol' thing. Three bites into my meal, I vomited across my plate and onto the table."

"Lamond!"

"No, wait." He chortled. "That's not the best part. My stepmother was furious and accused Willow of feeding us spoiled food. Delivering retribution, she forced Willow to fetch a spoon and eat every last bit of vomit I spewed, right down to licking it from the table."

Porcelain shattered behind me. As shocked as I was at Lamond's revolting story, I could not begin to imagine the outrage it struck in Livie. It was her mother who was the victim of this despicable behavior, and I would not have blamed her if she had thrown the jagged china at Lamond in response to his brutal enjoyment of her mother's abuse. Instantly, Livie began smashing what was left of the cups onto the tray. Both of her hands were bleeding now, and she wept angry tears of eternal heartache.

Lamond was taken aback by Livie's outburst. When she rose and lifted the tray of shattered finery from the floor, he headed her off at the door before she could escape the emotional lashing he had unwittingly laid on her. I feared what Livie might say or do as they stood face- to-face. The tray in her bloody hands rattled with fury. Lamond mistook it for cowering, but I knew better. She raised her eyes to his, challenging him to push her.

"What are you looking at, girl? If you want to bleed, I have a mind to hang you by your ankles from the nearest tree and beat every drop out of you."

His words had no impact on Livie's fiery stare. I had to intervene quickly. "You'll do no such thing, Lamond. The poor girl is hurt. Let her go tend to her injuries."

I angled close to Livie, begging her with my expression to move on while she had the opportunity. She relented to my silent plea, and the tray in her hands calmed. Livie tilted her head away from Lamond and stepped toward the door.

Lamond's hand snapped up and grabbed her by the chin, wrenching her face back toward him as he snarled.

"How do I know you, wench? The curve of your face is familiar to me."

The arch of Livie's defiant brow went limp. Livie pulled away, but he grasped her harder and brushed his thumb over the small, darkened birthmark that punctuated her cheek. After nearly a year, our charade hung precariously exposed in the light of day. Yet Lamond's expression remained puzzled. I prayed he was too dull of mind to make the connection between this womanly Virginia house servant and the young field slave who fled his plantation in North Carolina. After a long, tense moment, he shook her from his fingertips.

"Were you ever the property of my cousin the colonel?"

"No, sah," Livie said, keeping her head down and away from further scrutiny.

"I cannot recollect where I have seen you before, but it will come to me. For now, you better mind your place. I might not know where you are from, but I will make certain of where you are going, and that's straight to hell by way of the whip."

"Yas'sah." Livie bowed submissively, then sprang for the door like a cornered rabbit finding a way around the assault of an outwitted hound.

I breathed a sigh of relief and engaged Lamond in our studies as quickly as possible. When I finished my lesson, I searched the house and found Livie sitting on the floor in my room. She rocked back and forth, her eyes swollen from crying.

"I gots'ta leave here, Hannah. Young Massa Lamond is gonna remember me, and that'll be the end of it all fo' sure."

I fluffed my dress out and sat next to her, offering the comfort of my arm around hers. As shaken as I was, I knew Livie needed strength and guidance. "Do not panic, Liv. Running now will only put them on to you. Besides, Lamond did not recognize you, even though you struck a familiar chord in him. How much time did you spend in his presence back in Carolina?"

"He is the son bore of Massa's first wife. He is much older than me and was away from the big house fo' long spells. Every now and again, he would come back to the plantation and ride out to the fields to look us over, usually tellin' the overseer to drive us harder. I am taller and meatier now, but if he gets a hard look at me, he is likely to figure out his own runaway is right under his nose."

“Well, then, we must keep the two of you apart while I figure a way to end his stay with us.”

“I know it’s wrong,” Livie said with sullen clarity. “But if I had the wherewithal at the time, I would have plunged a pitchfork through him fo’ what he said about my mama.”

Although Livie’s hatred of Lamond was well-founded, it frightened me. I had long been accustomed to the disdain of white toward black. It was a natural part of the landscape and as predictable as the river bend and the creep of laurel over the mountain. But I had never seen or heard hatred flow openly in the opposite direction. News occasionally trickled in about an isolated uprising or slave attack against whites. However, the perpetrators in these stories were painted as ungrateful renegades possessed by beastly demons, or worse, used as puppets by sympathizers and abolitionists attempting to infiltrate the Southern infrastructure.

Livie was none of these things. She was simply a girl incensed by the mistreatment of someone she loved. Was it not basic human nature to be so? Rightful feelings, and surely not deserving of death by a noose, as was the recourse if such behavior was displayed by a slave. How many of these so-called uprisings were born of the same? Suddenly, the tension churning beyond the peaks of Echo Ridge became real and within reach, and its ugliness jolted me.

How I wished Colt was home. Having contained the fever of a few, he had returned to his duties with Dr. Waverly in Lows Hollow. Colt promised he would join us for the wedding festivities at week’s end, but I feared his homecoming would be too late should Lamond pursue his recognition of Livie. I instructed her to stay down in Mud Run, where Lamond would not have opportunity to study her a second time. His presence was now menacing to me. I could no longer concentrate or find enjoyment in our lessons. His loathsome account of abuse left me ruminating a time or two about pitchforks and blind justice. Livie’s wedding was less than a week away, yet our giddy anticipation was sucked away by worries of keeping her safe and unexposed. It seemed an impossible task, although I did not admit my worries to Livie. My fears were stoked to full blaze when Aunt Augusta joined us for tea one afternoon.

“Monsieur Charbonneau,” she said as she stirred her tea, then tapped her spoon on the rim of her cup. “There will be a broom ceremony tomorrow

afternoon, joining one of our slaves with one of Mr. Reynolds's. As is the custom, we will sit in witness and oversee the union. We would be honored if you joined us as our guest."

I had just lifted my steaming cup of tea to my lips when her words caused my delicate sip to gulp into my mouth like a branding iron. I spit the blistering drink back into my cup, and their eyes were drawn to me as I whimpered and patted my napkin against my numb lips. "Lamond has no interest in the business of our quarters. He prefers reading when he is free of his tutoring duties. Perhaps a day or two with his cousin the colonel would be a good antidote to the noise and commotion he would likely endure should he remain here."

"Nonsense," Lamond chimed in. "Watching the coloreds stomp and howl at one of their celebrations is quite entertaining. If nothing else, it will break the monotony of a weekly routine corseted by the cold winter here in the Virginia mountains."

"It is settled, then." Aunt Augusta nodded. "Since Colonel Richards enjoys the music and cooking of our Runians, I will send word inviting him as well."

"You are indeed a generous hostess, madame," he said, tipping his cup toward Aunt Augusta. *"Très bien, merci."*

I did not know enough French to say what I was thinking, but it certainly was not *very good, thank you*. I had to find a way to rid us of Lamond Charbonneau. The longer he remained, the greater his threat. Aunt Augusta finished her tea and excused herself, leaving Lamond and me alone. He did not appear ready to retire to our studies, so it did not surprise me when he reached for another tea biscuit.

"Yes, I will enjoy the broomstick ceremony, rudimentary as it is. All the mindless singing and carrying on amuses me. I think it must please me because it was one of the few occasions my stepmother and father were united when it came to the slaves. Mother held an uncommon viciousness toward the house slaves as a way of antagonizing my father. Don't misunderstand me; my father held a boot on the throat of every slave working the plantation, but he took a softer hand with those who worked in proximity to his home. It made Mother hate them all the more."

"If that is so, why did your stepmother have interest when the slaves married?"

“Because Father sought Mother’s advice in the pairings, so they sat with equal satisfaction on the grand porch to witness the completion of their decisions. Then the music would begin and the wenches would line up all their young ones to dance for us. Those little pickaninnies would stomp and smile like their lives depended on it.” Lamond chuckled to himself. “I guess their lives *did* depend on it, because their mamas knew, as we all did, if one or two struck special pleasure in us, they would be more likely groomed for the house than for the field. I can still see those eager little faces grinning as they danced the dance of destiny while we looked them over and took stock of them one by one.”

Like a flash, Lamond’s face lit up. “That’s it,” he gasped. He banged his cup onto the table and leapt to his feet. “That’s where I saw her!”

“Who?” My heart dropped, knowing the image in his mind was Livie.

“Your slave girl,” he said excitedly. “She was smaller and younger when I saw her last, but I am sure it’s her. Father said a group of them ran off last year. She looks to be the right age.”

“What a silly notion, Lamond. She belongs here.”

“How long has she been in your possession?”

My impulse was to say she had always been in my possession, but I had to be cautious not to twist facts that could easily be verified as untrue. “I received her as a gift from Colt. She was purchased far north of here. She certainly is no Carolina runaway.”

“My question is, How long has she been here at Hillcrest?”

“I am not certain exactly,” I said, hedging against his narrowing eyes. “She’s been here a long while. You are boorish, Lamond Charbonneau, questioning me like this.”

Still he would not be deterred. “Send for her, Hannalore. I want to have a closer look at the wench. What is her name?”

“Her name is Livie.” I gave him as little of her name as possible and braced for his reaction. He mulled it over, then shook his head.

“Most of them are nameless to me. I must see her.”

“Is this really necessary? I told you she is not your runaway.”

“Send for her now or I will seek her out myself.”

The last thing I wanted was Lamond cornering Livie in Mud Run. I had to squelch his curiosity once and for all. It’s surprising how desperation lends itself to creative thinking. I remember Livie saying that Marcus told

her, “You never know how much gumption you have until something pokes you hard enough.” So I feigned a sigh of impatience and led Lamond to the front porch. I called out to Elijah, who was hauling water to the carriage house. He set his bucket aside and trotted across the yard.

“Lamond, would you be a dear and bring me my wrap.” I ran my hands briskly up and down my arms to show my discomfort. “I will catch my death out here in the elements.”

Lamond turned his collar up and nodded in agreement. He stepped back inside about the same time as Elijah reached the porch. “Yas’sum, Miz Hannah?”

I kept my voice hushed. “I am playing a little game, so you must follow my instruction no matter how silly it may seem.”

He grinned playfully at me. “I like games. Mama says I’s good as gold at ’em.”

“In a moment, Mr. Lamond will come out here, and we are going to ask you to fetch Livetta. When you go down for her, tell her Master Charbonneau is with me, and she should send Tessie in her place.”

I brushed my hand over his soft, knitted hair when he turned a puzzled look in my direction. “This is the important part, and the best part of the game, Elijah. When you come back up the hill with Tessie, you must pretend she is Livetta. In fact, I want you to call her Livie, just as I do. Understand?”

Elijah nodded eagerly until the creak of the front door behind me cued him into his role. The gamble was huge, and potentially devastating, but there was no other way to thwart the inquisition. Aunt Augusta being in town for a few hours was my wild card, and I intended to use it. Elijah waited for Lamond to return to my side and drape my wrap around my shoulders. I pulled it snug around me and let the game begin.

“Elijah, I want you to go and find Livie. Please direct her here to the house. Monsieur Charbonneau would like to speak with her.”

“Yas’sum, Miz Hannah,” Elijah answered dutifully as he turned and started across the yard toward Mud Run.

“Wait, boy,” Lamond called out. Elijah hesitated and then returned. My heart sank with regret for putting him in a vulnerable position. There he was, just a child, staring up at Lamond, who loomed over him, arms folded. “Go bring me a set of shackles and a whip from the barn.”

Elijah's eyes widened. When he glanced anxiously over to me, all I could do was nod for him to obey. Although no hands were on my throat, I felt strangled. We were treading in dangerous territory, and the melody of death tinkled and clinked from the chains slung across Elijah's shoulder as he ran back to us across the yard.

"Throw them there on the bottom step," Lamond said, lighting a pipe he had pulled from his breast pocket. "Now, be off with you and fetch the girl. And, boy, you are only to say the mistress needs her. Make no mention of me."

"Yas'sah, Massa." Elijah quivered. "I'll fetch her as fast as I can."

With a sickening shriek, the whip and chains uncoiled from Elijah and fell in wait for Livie. Lamond did not speak as we waited on the porch. He was keen with excitement at the prospect of claiming this trophy. Livie was nothing more to him than a means to an end. Tracking down and reclaiming a runaway was highly regarded by the landowners whose livelihoods were congruent to the size and efficiency of their slave force. It kept the system strong and intact at a time when Northern pressure sought vulnerability. Throwing Livie at his father's feet would not only bear great weight in restoring his tarnished reputation, but would also ingratiate him back within his family ranks. He paced like a famished dog seeking a misplaced bone buried in the yard. The more impatient he became, the harder he puffed on his pipe. The smell of it sickened me, bringing to mind his story about Livie's mother. I despised him as much as I feared him. What a cruel twist of fate having him here.

"Lamond, this is silly," I said with a lilt meant to break the tension. "I told you the slave girl came to me in the most respectable way. Why must you be so stubborn?"

Lamond stared toward the path taken by Elijah. "You know nothing of her history before she came here. You are not at fault, mind you. I would not expect a woman to be keen in these matters."

When two figures strolled up over the knoll, Lamond quickly knocked his pipe against the banister, emptying its ashy contents onto the ground. He marched over to get a closer look as the huddled pair neared the porch. I gasped when his hand swooped up and grabbed the rag tied around her down-turned head and yanked it backward so her face rose toward the icy sun. Poor Tessie . . .

“This is not the wench who served us tea,” Lamond barked. “This one is taller and altogether different.” He gruffly angled Tessie’s face to examine the cheek where Livie had a birthmark. “This is not the same girl,” he snapped, glaring back over his shoulder at me.

“Of course she is, Lamond.” I smiled. “You are very stubborn for such a fine gentleman.” My attempt to appease him went without heed. The smile drained from my face when he released Tessie and hoisted Elijah by the collar.

“What is her name, boy?”

“He knows she is—” I tried interjecting, but Lamond threw his hand fiercely in the air, demanding my silence.

“I am speaking only to the boy.” Lamond’s eyes bore into Elijah’s. “Now you tell me the truth, or I will whip the flesh from your bones.”

“Miz Hannah said go fetch Livie,” Elijah said, dangling from Lamond’s fist, the tips of his toes lifted off the ground. How he maintained so much courage in the grasp of hatred, I shall never know. My heart tightened as he answered earnestly. “This here is Livie.” Tessie nodded, her eyes wide with terror as Lamond turned his doubtful glare back to her.

“Tell me your full given name.”

“Livie, sah.”

“I mean your master’s family name, given to you at birth.”

“Don’t rightly know.” Tessie shrugged. “Jes’ Massa to me.”

“Where is his plantation located?”

Perplexed, Tessie turned her head from right to left, then pointed east toward the river. “Could be that a-way.” She scratched behind her ear, adding to her presentation of confusion as she puzzled at the hills rising to the north. “Or maybe over the mountain yonder.”

“Damn ignorant wench,” Lamond grumbled, growing red with frustration. “It’s a waste of time expecting an intelligent answer from either one of them.”

I seized the opportunity presented by his momentary lapse in certainty. “I must retreat indoors, Lamond. The frigid air does not agree with me. There is nothing to be found here except the promise of fever and chills by morning. It’s time we return to the comfort of our books and continue our lesson.”

Lamond took one last disagreeable look at Tessie. “Go on back to your chores. You are of no use to me.”

Tessie and Elijah did not waste a blink of an eye by looking at me for approval. She took Elijah’s hand and scurried back across the yard. I did my part by looping my arm around Lamond’s and coaxing him back to the house. As we walked up the steps and onto the porch, I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see Tessie look back at us before they disappeared below the crest of the hill. When I turned back, Lamond was staring down at me, studying my expression. Although my stomach was knotted tighter than my corset, I offered him a weak smile. His lips remained tight, and his thoughts unsettled. We had won a brief reprieve from the threat of Lamond Charbonneau. However, Livie’s wedding was now only a day away. There she would be in full view of all, including the vengeful son of her rightful master.

Chapter 23

The dawn of Livie's wedding day brought with it my salvation from a sleepless night. I was terrified by the potential of the day. Possible outcomes played out in my mind, but I had yet to find a way to orchestrate them in Livie's favor. I dressed without conscious thought and walked the upper hallway in a gloomy trance toward the stairs. My heart lifted when my ears were met by a familiar voice resonating from downstairs. I rushed down the steps and into the pleasantly surprised arms of Colt.

"Well, now," he laughed. "I have never received a finer welcome."

"When did you arrive?" I pulled away, not wasting a moment.

"I rode in by the full moon last night."

"I need to speak with you."

"Can it wait, Hannah? I had business to discuss with Augusta before meeting with my father this morning. He is holding breakfast for me. Winston was retrieving my hat and gloves when you came down."

Winston lingered at the closet, giving me the chance to take Colt by the wrist and urge him to follow me. "Come with me to the sewing room, where we can speak freely and without notice."

Closing the door, I told him about Lamond and Livie, and what had transpired while he was gone. His face flushed, then drained pale as he clutched the quilting loom and ran a hand through his dark curls.

"What are the odds of him showing up here after all this time?" Colt walked to the window and stared out, as if waiting for an answer to float down off the mountain. "This is very bad, Hannah. Not just for Livetta, but for us as well. I will do all I can to keep you out of the veil of suspicion, but everyone knows how close we are, so even if your involvement cannot be proven, I fear you will be made to pay a price one way or the other."

"We must think of a way to keep Lamond from the wedding. If he has full view of Livie again, there will be no dissuading him."

"From what you have told me, I suspect he will seek out another look at her today, wedding or not."

“Perhaps if he has a weakness for liquor, as you told me, we can tempt him with drink.”

“He has remained steady in his reformed ways while he has been here,” Colt pondered outwardly. “It’s not likely he would chance even one toast without reason. For our purpose, anything short of stone-cold passed out would be pointless.” Suddenly, Colt spun around with eyes gleaming. “I have an idea.”

I clung to his arm like a child eager to hear the answer to an impossible riddle. With time running short, he was quick to oblige me. “It is risky,” he said, looking down at me to measure my resolve.

“Risk has been kind to us in the past,” I said, without wavering. “I trust your judgment.”

Colt told me about a powder he had in his medicinal bag, used to sedate someone in pain so treatment could be provided. Should Lamond ingest a carefully delivered dose, he would be temporarily unsteady and incoherent, much like a drunkard but without the drink. Given enough, he would lose consciousness and drift into a heavy sleep. I threw my arms around Colt’s waist and squeezed him.

“You are brilliant, Colt,” I told him proudly. “You always come to my rescue.”

“It’s far from brilliant,” he said, tight and concerned. “But I can think of no other option. I have administered the dosage only once, so I am not completely certain it will turn out as we hope.”

“Our plan will work, Colt,” I stated firmly. “It must.”

His golden brown eyes grew distant and troubled. “Using my medicine for deceit goes against all I believe in, Hannah. Were it not for the extreme circumstances and repercussions, I would never consider it. Even now, I feel I am betraying my training and counsel.”

I shook him to bring his attention back to me. “You are a good and compassionate man, Colton Reynolds. Follow your heart. It will guide you where you are meant to go. Some choices are not easy, but when they are for the good, they should be made with conviction.”

He looked at me thoughtfully and touched his hand to my cheek. “Anything good and compassionate in me was learned from you. And although you flatter me with your admiration, I know you are no longer a

child who needs rescuing, by me or anyone else. I am proud such a fine woman seeks me by her side in a time of need."

"Then let us begin." I smiled. "We've not much time."

A footrace began, with the pale sun climbing toward the midday sky, challenging us to finish before the festivities commenced. Colt coaxed Aunt Augusta back to West Gate with him so Uncle Mooney could escort her to the broom ceremony. He presented the idea as a wonderful display of unity between the plantations and sure to impress visitors and slaves alike. We were relieved when she agreed, because our plan could not be put in motion unless she was out of the house. When Colt and Aunt Augusta left by carriage, I was summoned to breakfast by Granny Morgan. Aunt Augusta had instructed Esther Mae to remain in the quarters to oversee preparation of food and drink for the celebration after the ceremony. Granny Morgan would join her at the completion of our morning meal, which was lengthened by the sleep habit of our unwelcome guest.

I had finished my breakfast and retreated to the parlor to practice French phrases when the sharp smack of Lamond's boots finally marched down the stairs. There was not much time left in the waning forenoon, and Colt had not yet returned from West Gate. I followed Lamond into the dining room to take tea with him while he ate. Keeping him under careful watch was all I could do until Colt returned. I had a moment of panic when it occurred to me that Aunt Augusta may have directed Tessie to the main house to serve in Esther Mae's place, but I was released from my fears when Granny Morgan entered the room, delivering him a breakfast tray and a steaming pot of chicory.

"Take that tray away, woman," Lamond grumbled with a wave of his hand. "I do not wish to partake in a meal this morning." Granny hesitated in picking up Lamond's tray. Her face glazed over with bewilderment.

"Are you deaf, woman? I said take it away."

Granny shuffled from side to side, obviously dismayed, until her face ripened with a big, toothy smile. "Massa gots'ta eat somethin' at the start of such a big day. Nobody 'round here leaves the table without a bellyful of Granny's biscuits. Best in the county, so say Miz 'Gusta."

Lamond looked as surprised as I at Granny's response to his command. Through the years, I had spoken long and warmly to Granny on occasions too numerous to count. In fact, some of my favorite memories were

listening to Granny's simple way of appreciating life's pleasures, or her clearheaded way of deciphering problems. These conversations were almost exclusively held in the confines of her kitchen, never out in view of the main house, where her presence was quiet and dutiful. Had I not worries already crowding my mind, I might have laughed at Lamond's twisted face.

"How dare you speak to me, woman? You have no right to form an opinion, much less direct it outwardly to me. My whip can lay open your wrinkled back as easily as it does a feisty young wench's. I am shocked by the boldness of you Virginian slaves."

"I's sorry, Massa," Granny said over and over as she collected the tray he shoved at her. "I's sorry." She wobbled with haste toward the entrance. Colt emerged to meet her, hands outstretched, and took the tray from Granny. He nodded at her as she looked at him for reassurance. I was so relieved at Colt's arrival, I did not dwell on the oddity of him entering by way of the kitchen. His mood was playful as he returned the tray to the table.

"Charbonneau, my good man, you do not wish to offend us by refusing our hospitality?"

"Of course not," Lamond said, sitting more erect and intimidated by Colt's directness. "I was—"

Colt cut him short. "From where I stand, it appears you are taking pleasure in harassing one of our most favored slaves?"

"My intention was—"

"No matter your intention, sir," Colt cut in, his voice raised against Lamond's explanation. He placed the tray in front of Lamond and pulled up a chair. Leaning in close to keep Lamond off balance, Colt flashed a disarming smile. "Granny is beloved in this home, having cared for Augusta and her sister when they were children. Granny fed the youngest at her breast when the girls' mother fell ill with consumption."

"If my demeanor appears disagreeable," Lamond sputtered contritely, "I sincerely apologize."

"Apology accepted." Colt continued to press him. "Now take some apple butter and enjoy one of Granny's biscuits. As she says, they are the best in the county."

Lamond nervously complied, placing a biscuit on his plate and dipping a knife in the apple butter. "Would anyone care to join me?"

I assumed Colt was stalling for extra time, so I accepted. “Yes, thank you.”

When Lamond glided the tray across the table toward me, Colt’s hand fell heavy on my wrist. “Augusta forbids Hannah second servings. Could it be our gracious offering is not of high enough standards for this elegant visitor?”

Lamond spread a large dollop of apple butter across a flaky biscuit and ate it to appease Colt. “Delicious, truly,” Lamond said, licking his finger as he gauged Colt’s reaction. “My compliments to your slave woman.”

Colt leaned back, aglow with a satisfied smile. “Indeed.”

I grew impatient as we lingered at the table while precious time slipped away. By now, the gathering below would begin to question our tardiness. With Lamond in tow, I would not witness Livie jump the broom into a new chapter of life. Instead I would likely see her life reopened to the pages of a horrifying past chapter thought to be closed and shelved forever. Fidgeting with the flatware, I attempted to catch Colt’s eye to urge him into action, but he was relaxed and disinterested. At this late hour, Livie’s fate was predestined. Anything short of delivering Lamond an unexpected blow to the head would not change the outcome.

Thoughts of Livie and what would become of her shook me from head to toe. I fanned my napkin against my hot cheeks as my heart tightened like a noose in my chest. Urging Livie to run was never an option I considered, because the image of her in the jaws of Twitch’s dogs was unbearable. Now, however, I wish I had directed her in taking the risk. At least she would have had a chance, rather than be cornered like a plump turkey about to be slaughtered for the master’s contentment.

“Hannah, you look faint.” I gazed up at Colt, who had come around the table and hovered over me.

“Indeed, there is something in the air.” Lamond’s garbled voice floated somewhere beyond my vision.

Colt eased me to my feet. “Come, stand near the window and let the sun clear your head.”

The sunlight glared through the window, slicing me open and exposed. Distanced from Lamond, I whispered desperately, “We have failed, Colt. There is no boulder large enough to change the course of this vicious river

of injustice. Livie will be swallowed by the current just as she was nearly a year ago. Was she saved only to meet a crueler fate?"

"Hannah, look at him." Colt guided my shoulders as he turned me around. "The necessary boulder has already been delivered. Now, let's hope the waters will shift."

Across the room, Lamond swayed in his chair. He was perspiring heavily and tugging at his neckerchief for relief. "I do believe . . ." He struggled as his words lost form. "There, there is something . . ." He slowly slumped forward onto the table. "In the air."

The last of his sentence ended in a groan, followed by silence.

Colt nudged me toward Lamond's motionless body. "Hurry, Hannah. Help me move him to the parlor."

Colt bore the bulk of Lamond's limp weight. He hoisted Lamond from his chair and dragged him from the dining room, down the hall, and into the parlor. My contribution was limited to keeping Lamond's arms from sweeping a porcelain vase off the table as we tossed him across a chair in the parlor.

"Is he dead?"

Colt looked at me, startled and a bit perturbed. "You know me better than that." He lifted one of Lamond's booted feet and swung it up over the arm of the chair. "I added a dash of elixir to his apple butter. Hopefully, enough to make him incoherent for the duration of the broom ceremony, where he would have had an extended opportunity to inspect Livetta and expose the masquerade."

Lamond's unresponsive figure lay sprawled in a heap before us. One foot drooped to the floor, while the other draped over the arm of the chair. His disheveled appearance was in sharp contrast to the smooth silk cushions he rested upon. Colt withdrew a small bottle of brandy from inside his jacket, and without saying a word proceeded to pour half its contents across Lamond's clothing. He then tossed the bottle on the rug near Lamond's foot.

"You are so clever." Even in dire circumstances, I could not help smiling as Colt's plan became clear in my head.

"*Clever* is not the word I would choose to describe how I feel at the moment."

I stepped close to Colt and straightened his jacket. His code of ethics as a man of medicine had been compromised to protect Livie. The degree of his sacrifice deserved acknowledgment. “I know how hard this is for you, Colt, but extreme circumstance requires extreme action. Thank you for being so brave.”

Colt softened under my touch, and I was drawn to his unwavering faithfulness. His hands reached up and covered mine where they clung to his jacket. Warmth caressed me and pulled me closer to him. Safe and at home in his arms, I quivered as a cavern of unexplored passion opened in me. But when he softly brushed a finger across my lips, my swaying heart stumbled with remembrance of the same intimate gesture shared with Marcus in the cave. Colt’s eyes startled at the hitch in my breath. Flushing with guilt and discomfort, I retreated from the touch that reminded me of my secret indiscretion.

“Please don’t pull away,” he said sweetly.

“Your father and Aunt Augusta must wonder where we are,” I said, dripping with trepidation. “All of Mud Run is awaiting our arrival.”

Contented with the tender moment we shared, Colt pulled on his overcoat and grinned at me from beneath the brim of his derby. “Let’s not keep them waiting, then.”

Colt offered me his arm, and as we descended into the vale toward the gathering, our presence signaled the start of activity. Groups of Runians huddled together near the open doors of the tobacco barn. Arranged inside was a makeshift platform with cushioned benches, where the two plantation families and our guests could sit comfortably and observe the joining of our slaves.

Aunt Augusta and Uncle Mooney remained seated in an enclosed carriage, protected from the brisk wind. Twitch, his collar pulled high and his hat tugged low, leaned against a rain barrel half- filled with the frozen remnants of a shower dropped back in early December, around the time of the shucking. So much had happened in the month and a half since rain collected in the barrel. *Gracious be, it seems like a lifetime ago*.

As Colt and I neared, Twitch jerked his head toward Willy Jack, who rushed over and opened the door to Uncle Mooney’s carriage. Until then, I had not noticed the other carriage winched a short distance down the road. After Aunt Augusta and Uncle Mooney disembarked, Colonel Richards

appeared from the other carriage. He quickened his pace to catch up with and join them at the barn entrance, all the while looking perplexed at why his cousin was not present.

I braced to be scolded, but to my surprise, Aunt Augusta looked beyond me and leveled her stern eyes on Colt. Before words could be spoken or questions asked, I quickly offered an apology.

“Pardon our tardiness. We were waiting for Lamond, who has declined our invitation.”

“Indeed,” Colt said. “He seems to be in sour and disgruntled spirits today. We attempted to encourage him to join us.”

“He instructed us to leave him alone,” I jumped in. “Quite rudely, I might add.”

The colonel removed his hat and held it to his chest in a display of embarrassment and displeasure. “If this is so, I cannot imagine what has gotten into him. I shall run up to the house and remind him of his gentlemanly manners. I promise you, he will return with me.”

“Nonsense,” Uncle Mooney barked. I never thought a time would come when I would welcome his gruff impatience. “We have already wasted the better part of an hour, and too much of a day lost with my stock standing here idle. Let him be. Truth be told, if not for my vested interest, I would not be here either. Now let us get on with it, so we can tend to more important matters.”

The colonel conceded to Uncle Mooney’s wishes. Relief tugged the corners of my mouth, making it hard to harness the smile, but the moment I saw Livie step from the shadows of the barn, my elation could not be contained. Her face was serene and womanly, her chestnut skin accentuated by the cranberry chenille wrapped tight around her head. The dress she wore was made uniquely her own with the addition of a cranberry sash, altered from part of the chenille, draped across her waist, and tied at her hip so the length could tumble down her thigh. Her shawl, dyed in a root mixture close in color to her headdress, hung delicately around her shoulders. All my fears were forgotten in Livie’s regal presence.

After we took our seats on the platform, James stepped from the crowd, followed by Granny Morgan, who carried a broom decorated with tattered ribbon and bows. I never paid much attention to the broom ceremonies in the past. Aunt Augusta always required me to be present, but they were

usually over soon after we arrived. We never stayed to observe any celebration. There would be music and a brief festivity afterward, but certainly nothing like the extravagant weddings of our social circle. As the ceremony began, I glanced at the slave force adjacent to us. Uncle Mooney's slaves stood apart from ours, herded together in loosely organized rows. Twitch stood with his back to us and one hand on the whip hanging from his belt, detached from the ceremony and keeping close watch on the stock. Willy Jack walked amid the rows, nudging unaligned children back to their mothers' sides.

My heart ached at seeing their faces, so painfully clear to me now. No lips smiling or eyes glimmering. They stared blankly, not really seeing. Bodies stripped of spirit. Not allowed to live; only permitted to survive. I turned, seeking comfort in our Runians, but they bore no seeds of contentment either. Yes, they were warmed by newer clothes and perhaps meatier from larger rations, but their faces wore the same tired strain, and their shoulders were rounded by the same unending burdens. My eyes stung with sadness and shame.

I turned my head toward the peak and thought of Marcus. I reflected on his journey to and from the North, understanding his passion in a more profound way. He is a selfless savior of souls. His courage and commitment endeared him deeper in my heart. I felt his presence in and around me. How I wished he was up there among the trees, watching his sister be married. Would his eyes find me and stir with emotion, as Colt's had earlier? I struggled to make sense of my preoccupation with Marcus and the feelings of disloyalty it brought upon me. The swell of my conflicting desires overflowed my eyes and spilled down my cheeks.

"My dear Hannah," Colt whispered softly, misinterpreting my emotion. "You are so sentimental."

His words tugged me from my daydream. Lost in my thoughts, I almost missed the entire ceremony. Granny signaled Livie and James to jump over the broomstick. Livie smiled at me with excitement, and James stood tall and proud, holding her hand. Just as they crouched to jump, a bellowing cry echoed down over the knoll.

"Stop this nonsense! Stop it, I say. That wench belongs to me!"

The sight of Lamond staggering down the hillside brought me to my feet in agonizing terror. Livie's face went ashen and she turned to run, but James

held tightly to her hand, keeping her in place, where he could calm her.

“What in dag blazes,” the colonel muttered.

“Colonel,” Uncle Mooney said with a smirk, “your cousin looks to be inebriated.”

The elixir Colt prepared had not been strong enough to keep Lamond unconscious for an extended period, but its impact could still be seen as he stumbled to the ground, then dragged himself upright and continued zigzagging down toward the stunned gathering.

“She is mine, I tell you,” he shouted in garbled anger. “No one shall have her but me!” He pushed through the crowd and fell at our feet.

“What a disgrace,” Aunt Augusta huffed toward the colonel. The smell of brandy filled the air as he reached down and pulled Lamond to his feet. The colonel’s cheeks flushed with fury.

“You no-good ingrate,” Colonel Richards snarled as he shook Lamond by his lapels. “Is this the thanks I get for giving you the opportunity for redemption?”

In his grogginess, Lamond was unaware of the colonel’s attack. He continued to twist his head and point to Livie. “You know damn well you are mine, woman. Tell them you belong to me!”

The colonel shook him harder, then leaned in to his ear to deliver a hushed warning: “Laying down with a wench in the shadow of night does not make her yours.”

“I did not lay down with—” Lamond held his head as if struck by a hammer. Even in his incoherent condition, he was startled by the colonel’s grip on him. He began to whimper with confusion. “I tell you, she is mine.”

The colonel stared coldly at him, then pulled him toward his carriage. As they passed us, the colonel hesitated and bowed slightly. “Augusta, please accept my apologies for this disruptive display and for the flaw in character indulged by my cousin. I shall take him to the house and gather his belongings. He will be gone by the time you return.”

Aunt Augusta responded with one curt nod, acknowledging both his apology and his plan to excise his cousin from our property. Still protesting, Lamond was heaved into the colonel’s carriage and taken away. As dust tossed in their wake, I glanced over at Livie, who had unburied her face from James’ shoulder to watch the exodus. She looked at me in amazement.

I raised my eyebrows and gave her a subtle shrug of my shoulders, which made her bite her lip to keep from smiling too broadly.

“Come now, you two,” Granny Morgan’s voice boomed, successfully drawing everyone’s attention back to Livie and James. “Stop dawdlin’ and jump on over dis here broom.”

They grinned at each other, clenched hands, and jumped, raising a cheer from the crowd. As the Runians surrounded the newly united pair, they hollered and laughed, slapping James on the back and kissing Livie’s cheeks. The slaves of West Gate were not given a moment longer to watch. Willy Jack herded them together and directed them back into the cold wind howling down the mountain. Uncle Mooney and Aunt Augusta walked toward their carriage, satisfied with the conclusion of a solid business deal.

“Come, Hannah. It is much too cold to observe the festivities,” she commanded me. “With Esther Mae and Granny granted the afternoon here, your uncle has invited us to supper at West Gate. We shall mark the occasion privately.”

“We shall be along in a moment,” I called to her. The Runians parted as Colt and I went to give our blessing to Livie and James. Livie reached her hands to me. I held them tightly in mine as we beamed at one another. “You look beautiful, Livie.”

Without thought of who would be watching or disapproving, we embraced each other. Livie squeezed me extra tight and whispered, “I don’t know how you saved me from him, but thank you.”

“Colt deserves your praise,” I whispered back. “I believe his first patient was a bit dissatisfied.” We giggled until tears moistened our cheeks. Colt shook James’s hand and tipped his hat toward Livie.

“Thank you, Mista Colt,” she said with discreet sincerity.

“Many blessings and good health to you both.” He smiled. He turned to take my arm, but Twitch stepped between us, cutting a plug of tobacco and shoving it into his mouth. He gave no indication he overheard our secret exchanges, but his dead eye seemed to spark of the devil. Colt shifted in front of me, in time to hide the look of panic rising hot on my cheeks. I took Colt’s arm and let him escort me to our carriage. When I glimpsed over my shoulder, Twitch’s lips uncoiled from beneath his mangy whiskers into a speculating grin. He was a tracker, and the flare of his nostrils told me that just like Lamond, he too sensed something amiss in the air.

Chapter 24

A great freeze overtook Echo Ridge, and some say the whole of western Virginia. With it came an increased loss of livestock and the death of countless slaves weakened by age or malady, who succumbed to the brutal elements. The Red Hawk River froze over as far as the eye could see, and all forms standing apart from the earth—house, rocks, trees, and fences—were layered with a coating of ice so thick it looked like all the world was dipped in hot wax and set to dry.

"Seen a lifetime o' winters come and go, but 'tain't never see'd nothin' like this 'un," Granny muttered over the cook pot each morning. "So cold that when the dog makes water out back, he is likely to freeze hisself solid to the tree." Elijah chuckled as he threw another log on the fire in the kitchen.

The harsh weather meant Marcus was never far from my thoughts. There was no way of knowing where he was, or if he was safe from the bleak conditions, killing all exposed to its frigid touch. No man could survive such a battle with nature, no matter how strong or determined. I could not share my worries with Livie. She knew nothing of Marcus's travels, and telling her now would be cruel and pointless. Besides, she had not been well of late, appearing drained of spirit and vigor.

Livie's fatigue worsened, causing me great concern. Most days I would send her to my bed for periods of time, but it did not seem to help. Her appetite waned, and I was certain that if she ate more her spark would return. "Don't you fret none, Miz Hannah," Granny would say when I begged her to force Livie to eat. "Sure as chickens lay eggs, Livetta be fine and growin' plump once the grass 'neath the snow shows itself again."

Granny was right. By the time the great freeze loosened its grip, Livie was back to her old self, with a thickening waist that confirmed what Granny had suspected all along. Livie was with child.

After holding us hostage for more than two months, the hard shell of winter finally cracked under the assault of the mild April sun. Wagon tracks and footprints multiplied in the receding snow, marking the return of life on

the mountain. The once-abundant shelves and baskets in the pantry and root cellar held more dust than preserves. Flour and sugar were used sparingly, to make them last until we could send Winston and Esther Mae into town to replenish our supplies. Once they deemed the roads safe and passable, subsequent trips would include Aunt Augusta, and eventually me. Like bears waking from hibernation, we shook off winter's sluggishness and excitedly reconnected with the world.

The return of Winston and Esther Mae from their first trip into town was inevitably bittersweet. The thrill of seeing a well-supplied wagon rolling over the horizon was tempered with news of friends and neighbors who did not survive the rigors of the season. The postmaster sent along a modest bundle of letters tied together with a string. Most of the correspondence was business related and pleased Aunt Augusta. The remaining letters came bearing word, good and bad, from acquaintances afar. When the wagon was unloaded and the supplies organized, Winston and Esther Mae were summoned to the dining room to report on their trip in detail.

Winston stood inside the doorway, rubbing the warmth back into his hands. "Road is a mite ruddy, Miz 'Gusta, but soft enough to give de horses good footin'. Ol' Massa Harvey from the livery got killed a few weeks back when de ice got too heavy on de roof of his rear stable and gave way. Crushed seven horses wit' him. Two of de Yancy chilluns died o' de fever, and over at de mercantile Massa Watkins's wife, Miz Sara, was overtook by de death cough. Died jes' four days ago."

"Po' Mabelle is doin' what she can fo' Massa Watkins," Esther Mae said, her throat tight with distress. "But dere is no consolin' him."

Aunt Augusta took account of all that was reported. She did not inquire about the condition of the neighboring slave families, but it was evident by Esther Mae's strained expression that many did not fare well. "Lots o' other folk was lost too," Esther Mae said softly as she left Winston's side and disappeared into the kitchen. Her low, heart-wrenching sobs soon followed. Winston shuffled nervously, feeling the need to explain Esther Mae's abrupt and unauthorized departure.

"Esther Mae's sister Sophie froze solid in de snow after rations was cut off over at de Patterson place across de river. Wit' three chilluns to feed, she went diggin' fo' roots and perished. Dey found two of her chilluns starved dead in dere beds. Her little girl, Sugar, was t'only one to make it through."

The image of a woman and children I had never seen flashed in my mind. It painted a harsh portrait of Esther Mae's simple words, *"lots o' other folk was lost too."* I understood the need to stretch rations, but cut them off altogether? It was a brutal portrait indeed.

"Is the river passable?" Aunt Augusta asked, without as much as a considerate pause of acknowledgment.

"Each mild day softens de ice up some, but no boat nor barge is ready to challenge de river. The timber truss bridge is mighty unsteady with all de shiftin' ice. Dey say dere is a powerful ice jam in a narrow pass upriver. Folks is frettin' it might give way, suddenlike, and flood de lowlands."

The threat got Aunt Augusta's attention. "Are you certain, Winston? Such an event would be disastrous for the town of Echo Ridge and the plantations along the river's edge."

"Dey say planters south o' town is sendin' groups o' dere best field men upriver to try and break up de ice slow and careful so de normal flow of de river can get goin' again."

Aunt Augusta shook her head in dismay. "A desperate plan, sure to end as nothing more than a death march."

"Thank goodness we are on high ground," I muttered, understanding the fury of an unleashed river.

Aunt Augusta patted my back with uncharacteristic gentleness. "We are sure to stay dry. But the impact of high water brings consequence to lives far beyond the river's path. Let us pray the transition from winter to spring is gentle." Then, with apprehension clouding her eyes, Aunt Augusta excused herself and exited the room.

The warm spring breezes carried the melody of songbirds happy to be home. The Runians began the task of readying the fields and planting the young tobacco shoots that had been protected and germinating in seedbeds fertilized with ash and manure. There was a modest rise in the river, but far less than what a normal spring thaw would bring to these parts. With the abundance of ice and snow accumulated during winter, the town folk feared the magnitude of water held by the ice jam reported upstream. Some nearest the river purchased baled hay from surrounding plantations. They stacked them near their doorsteps to absorb any runoff if the river breached its banks.

The exodus of Twitch at the first sign of warm weather was as predictable as the apple blossoms on the trees. After enduring confinement brought by the long winter months, he was biting at his bit like a restless horse seeking the open fields. The business of slave catching began with the first signs of spring, because the turn of the season made for favorable conditions if a slave had it in his mind to run.

“I gotta pick ’em when they’re ripe,” Twitch would declare once the chilly March winds were a distant memory. Uncle Mooney allowed Twitch to head out for three weeks in spring and four weeks near summer’s end, so he would be back before the harvest season. Occasionally, Twitch was hired out on a special hunt, but the handsome profit he made was well worth giving him leave of the plantation. So with the town’s compromised bridge keeping him from crossing his wagon to the road leading south, he was in an especially cantankerous mood.

“I fail to see the issue, Twitchell,” Uncle Mooney snorted in between bites of a smoked- ham dinner shared one Sunday afternoon at West Gate. “Just ride out to the west. You have always had great fortune in Kentucky.”

“More to be had south this early on,” Twitch stated confidently, as a man who knew his business from every angle. “The borderland of Kentucky ain’t ripe until summer. Gotta give ’em time to work their way north. Now is the time to go south, see who is postin’ rewards, and snatch up the ones new to the trail. They start off so unsure, I am like a swamp gator snappin’ up fresh-hatched tadpoles.”

“Umm, no wasted effort,” Uncle Mooney mused with an admiring nod. “That’s good business sense, plain and simple. Not like this one.” He pointed his fork at Colt, who had been unusually quiet all day. “Look at him sulking because I forbid him to run off to Lows Hollow while Twitch is on the road, earning his keep. The boy wastes time *learning* instead of *earning*.” Uncle Mooney and Twitch howled at the joke played at Colt’s expense. “Besides,” Uncle Mooney said, clearing his throat, “I need him here on the plantation, where he can be of some use.”

Colt threw down his napkin and turned to Aunt Augusta. “Excuse my abrupt departure; however, I have lost my appetite.”

“Colt, wait,” I said as he left.

“Oh, let him go,” Uncle Mooney said with the wave of his hand. “He is just like his mother, God rest her delicate soul. He has no sense when it

comes to the importance of money."

Twitch was quick to chime in. "I was only knee-high when my mama passed, but can still hear her tellin' Pa that the only man worth holdin' is a man wit' a jingle in his pocket."

"Fine woman, your mama." Uncle Mooney leaned back in his chair and grinned wickedly. "And a damn good cook."

"One of the last things my mama said before my daddy put a bullet through her heart was, 'Boy, don't sit around waitin' for fortune to find you. It belongs to the first man ready to snatch it.' And no truer words was ever spoken. Them good- for-nothin' bucks workin' on the weakened bridge are costin' me more money than I care to speak of in mixed company. I say let's take James into town and hire him out for the job. We make some cash, and he'll get the job done faster and better than all of 'em put together."

"Excellent idea," Uncle Mooney said, and hoisted a glass of sherry in the air. "We'll ride down tomorrow. You see, Augusta: good business, plain and simple."

And so it was: James was hired out for the repair of the truss bridge. It was difficult and dangerous work. Access to the damaged bridge required a team of slaves to wade, chest high at times, into the cold, swollen river. More than once, portions of the bridge collapsed and were swept downriver, causing a slave or two to be plucked from the water by outstretched branches or boat oars. Livie was worried about James and missed him terribly by week's end. When Aunt Augusta suggested she and I ride into town the following Saturday, I surprised Livie with the invitation to accompany us. She sat between Winston and Elijah up on the driver's bench, and even though I could see only the back of her bonnet from where I sat in the carriage, I could tell she was smiling the entire ride.

When we arrived in town, Winston dropped our group in front of the mercantile, then took the wagon to the livery to secure the horses. Elijah followed Aunt Augusta to the entrance of the mercantile, where Mabelle sat singing a familiar song about wading in the water. He rushed to hug her and deliver a package of sweet-potato biscuits prepared by Granny Morgan. "Is dat dere Miz 'Gusta come with word o' my blessed sister?"

"Yes, Mabelle," Aunt Augusta said, touching the blind woman's hand so she could grab a hold. "Your sister is well and sends her greetings with some of her delicious biscuits."

“Bless you, Miz ’Gusta.”

Elijah remained with Mabelle, who gladly shared her biscuits with him as he delivered her news and gossip from the plantation. Livie’s eyes followed the road down to the river, where the sound of hammer and saw accompanied the grunts of the slave gang at work. From among the laboring figures, James’s large frame stood upright, as if sensing his woman. His broad smile could be seen from where we stood. When he raised his hand, Livie smiled and raised both of hers in return.

“Go visit with James,” I nudged. “I shall send for you when we are ready to return home.”

She lifted her skirt and ran down the street to James’ open arms. How exhilarating it must be to rejoin with a love denied you. The thought pinched within me, and left me all the more restless and wanton.

“Where you at, Miz Hannah? Elijah boy says you is here too.”

I went to take the hand Mabelle held out to find me. “I am here, Mabelle. Granny says to give you a big ol’ hug from her.” I put my arms around Mabelle’s shoulders and squeezed, making her laugh with joy. Elijah scampered off to help his father at the livery, giving me the opportunity to sit next to Mabelle and talk awhile. Her wrinkled hands took stock of my fingers and wrist before clasping tight.

“You is all growed up and ladylike, Miz Hannah. You got yo’ papa’s long fingers, but I bet you is de picture of beauty like yo’ mama.”

“I have no portraits of her, but Granny says I favor her. Although my dark hair is a trait left to me by my father.”

“He was a fine and handsome man, inside and out.”

“What were they like, Mabelle? No one ever speaks of them. You mentioned them to me at the corn shucking, and they have been on my mind ever since. Aunt Augusta says I remind her of Mama, but she says it in a way that could be intended as good or bad.”

Mabelle’s hand tightened and fiddled nervously across my palm. “Better leave well enough alone, chile. Better leave well enough alone.”

“Hannah.” Aunt Augusta’s voice made Mabelle and me jump as one. “Stop pestering the old woman. You are disorienting her with your questions. Leave Mabelle to her routine.”

“I’s sorry, Miz ’Gusta,” Mabelle said, turning her head to the sky. “I didn’t say a word ’bout nothin’.”

Aunt Augusta cut her short as she prodded me to my feet. “Have you any message for me to carry home to Granny?”

“Tell her a sister’s love don’t never die. It’s in the heart fo’ever. You knowed dat, Miz ’Gusta.”

“Time to go, Hannah,” Aunt Augusta said, signaling across the street where Winston and Elijah talked with Mac Prentiss’s hired man, Toby. “Where is Livetta?”

“I allowed her time with James down near the bridge.”

“I’ll fetch the carriage directly, Miz ’Gusta,” Winston called over.

“Meet us down the street, Winston.” Aunt Augusta pointed. “We are going to see how the bridge is coming along.”

“Yas’sum,” Winston acknowledged with a tug of his felt hat as Elijah tagged along after him with two bundles of purchased goods from the mercantile.

The riverfront was a hub of activity. Two dozen slaves were at various locations in the water, on the bridge, and in rowboats tied to the bridge. Several recognizable overseers, including Twitch, stood on the riverbank. They barked orders and watched every move made by the men as they patched and replaced timber planks and posts damaged on the structure. With James’s expertise, it was a well-organized effort. A number of men worked from the other side of the river, but were not progressing as quickly as their counterparts. Fortunately, Twitch had been distracted by a group struggling to replace a submerged post. This gave Livie and James time to walk behind one of the supply wagons and embrace and talk. When James saw us approaching, he removed his hat and nodded gratefully.

“Afta’noon, Miz ’Gusta, Miz Hannah. Sure does a man good seein’ his wife and unborn chile fo’ a spell. Makes me work all the harder jes’ to get home.”

Livie looked renewed as well. “James says it should only be a few more days until the bridge is ready to hold a wagon and team again.”

“We been workin’ by lantern half the night so . . .” James hesitated, then frowned, slowly turning his ear north, straining to hear. The rumble was soft and distant at first, but rose in intensity as we all stared blankly at one another.

“What the hell?” bellowed Twitch, who had not moved from his spot at the top of the bank but was now ankle-deep in water.

“Pull us in, Massa!” a voice cried out from the river. The men who moments earlier had been waist-deep in the current were now flailing about in water up to their chins. “We is goin’ under, Massa! Pull us in!”

The booming roar grew louder and a lantern hanging from the carriage clattered and began swinging from side to side. Livie grabbed my arm, her face frozen in terror. I spun around and saw the trees beyond the river bend north of town snapping and dropping from sight as the ground shook beneath my feet.

One of the overseers anchoring the lifeline to his slaves threw the rope aside and ran past Twitch. “Run! The ice jam gave way!”

No sooner had the words cleared his lips when a wall of water and ice came thundering around the bend. The banks of the river could not hold its fury. The slaves who stood in the river shrieked for their lives as they were swept away by the crashing wave. Chunks of ice plowed through buildings along the waterfront. The whine of cracking wood and rushing water set off desperate screams from every direction. I clung to Livie as a chilling surge of water was forced up the road by the power of the unleashed ice jam and rose over our knees. James sloshed his way toward us, pushing aside buckets and splintered timber that bobbed across his path. Using his arms, he braced us against the current fighting to uproot us.

“I cannot move, James!” My wet dress hung heavy and sunken like an anchor. As quickly as I spoke the words, the water crest was at my waist. James’s strength was all that held Livie and me upright. He struggled like an overburdened pack mule, unsure of where to shift his weight. He lifted us, each under one arm, high enough to free our boots from the thick mud and guide us up the road where the water was not as deep. Those not swallowed by the current ran toward higher ground. Winston had brought the carriage down from the livery and was caught as water gushed over the bottom half of his wagon wheels. He wrestled the spooked horses by their bridles in an attempt to lead them to safety, but the horses reared up, causing the carriage to lurch to one side. Elijah was thrown from the driver’s bench headfirst into the murky flood. Winston released the horses and ran for Elijah. Once in deeper water, Winston’s movement slowed to a crawl as the current pulled Elijah farther away from him. With a loud groan, James pushed us in Elijah’s direction and plucked him by the shirt, seconds

before he was swept downstream. Elijah secured himself to James's back and the group of us trudged toward Winston.

Seeing his son was saved, Winston realized he was in the best position to help us, so he navigated his way back to the carriage. He grabbed a rope from under the driver's seat and tied it to the back of the carriage, then tossed the other end in our direction. We hung on as the river tried to rip us from our vine. Winston moved quickly around the carriage, and with a commanding touch settled the horses. He led them up the road, keeping his eyes locked on us as he fished us out of the stream. Once in shallow water, we stumbled our way to the carriage.

Winston gathered Elijah in his arms and sobbed tears of relief. The joy was short-lived, though, because the water continued to seep its way up into town. James helped Livie and me into the carriage, then called to Winston, "We gots'ta get on higher ground."

Winston lifted Elijah back up onto the bench. He looked around anxiously. "Where's Miz 'Gusta?"

"Don't know," James shouted above the frantic chorus. In our struggle, we did not see what became of her. We scanned the chaos around us to no avail. James grabbed two sinking men, one white and one black, and tugged them into shallow water. "We gots'ta move de hosses and carriage befo' it's too late."

"Miz 'Gusta!" Winston yelled as he climbed up and stood on the driver's bench to get a better view. "Where you at, Miz 'Gusta?"

Livie went limp in my arms, exhausted. "I don't want to lose my chile. Do you think my baby drown inside me with all this water?"

"No, Livie," I said, scrambling to lift the top of the bench seat in the carriage. Aunt Augusta stored quilts inside the hollow seat to safeguard them from dust and rain on their way to market. I took one and wrapped it around Livie to warm her trembling body. "Your baby is safe inside you. We shall get you to dry land even if I have to carry you there myself."

I looked for James. He had the banker's wife around the waist and her three young children in tow. When he pulled them far enough to continue the escape on their own, he waded through the water rising halfway up his thigh. "We gots'ta move now, Winston!"

"Miz 'Gusta," Winston called out, cupping his hands around his mouth. "I can't see you. Is you out there?"

Tears filled his eyes as he held his hands to his head. “Lawd have mercy at the sight befo’ me.” His shoulders hunched with defeat as he stepped down to take the reins.

“Here,” a strained voice called out. “Winston, I am here by the toolshed.” Winston spun around and jumped into the water.

“Go back and ready the hosses, Winston,” James yelled as he pushed his way to where Aunt Augusta, drenched and unrecognizable, was clinging to the top of a doorframe. Her body stretched lengthwise across the surface of the water trying to snatch her downstream. Riding the current, James reached her quickly. “I got her, Winston,” James called. “I got her.”

Winston reached them and helped free Aunt Augusta’s hands, which clenched the frame so tightly it was as though survival instinct nailed them to the wood. Each with an arm around her, the determined men dragged Aunt Augusta from the deep water. The great and mighty Augusta Reynolds was a rag doll in their arms, but they handled her with protective gentleness until she got her feet under her as they reached waist-high water. By the time they lifted her into the carriage, all three were so physically drained, they could not speak.

“Get over here, boy,” a voice demanded from a whirl of splashing water behind us. “Come fetch me. My leg is tangled in some chicken wire.” Twitch’s nasty bite did not ease even as he thrashed desperately for his life. “I said, move your lazy haunches over here!”

Neither James nor Winston lifted a head in Twitch’s direction. James looked over at Winston, who stared back without a flinch in his expression. Heaving an anxious breath, Winston crawled to the open bench seat and rummaged for a quilt to wrap around Aunt Augusta. “I best move these horses befo’ we sink too deep in de mud.”

James struggled onto his knees, then rested his head against the small mound of Livie’s seeded belly. Livie rubbed his wet back and wept softly. After catching his breath, James pressed his hand to Livie’s cheek. “We gonna get you gals up on dry land now. Everybody hold tight, ’cuz the hosses is gonna have to fight dere way outta the muck. Might throw us around a bit.”

“James, you no-good—” Twitch cursed as he gulped and spat the floodwater pushing him into the splintered remains of a shed. “Untangle me now!”

James stood as though Twitch's voice was unheard. He jumped down into the water where Winston had already started pulling the team, coaxing their entrenched hooves from the muddied road beneath the floodwaters. The cries of those around us were deafening as the watery assault continued. If we did not move immediately, we would be washed over by the currents still swirling and snatching victims into its grip. A terrified yelp rose from the water to our left.

"Sweet Jesus, have mercy on an ol' woman," Mabelle cried as she held to an apple barrel dragged off by the river. Her face, nearly submerged, was slapped over and over again with brown water. "Save me from de fist of hell and deliver me to de Promised Land!"

James ran toward her, but the deep water had become thick with silt, slowing his stride and broadening the distance between them. James dove beneath the surface. "James!" Livie screamed. There was no sight of him. We all stood and searched the water now peppered with corpses and remnants of an uprooted town. The degree of tragedy unfolded before us. Buildings, livestock, and people swept by. I held tightly to Livie's hand as she screamed for James. Aunt Augusta came and steadied her from the other side. Livie buried her face into my shoulder. Like a rising turtle, James appeared from the dark water and grabbed Mabelle across her breast. He tugged hard and stroked with relentless determination. Mabelle choked and spit up water. The closer James moved her in our direction, the easier it got for her to lift her chin and breathe in the sweet air of salvation. Winston waded out and snatched them each by the collar. To my amazement, he summoned the strength to pull them toward us.

"Toss that worthless blind woman aside and help me!" Twitch screamed as he drifted farther downstream. "I command you to come for me now, or answer to the whip later."

We focused our attention on Mabelle. James carried her in his arms and laid her into the carriage. She was weak and disoriented. Aunt Augusta threw a blanket over her. Livie reached for James, his hand bracing Mabelle's shoulder with encouragement. James squeezed Livie's hand as he shivered with exhaustion. " 'Tain't no time to spare," he called to Winston. "Let's move them hosses."

Elijah scrambled up to the driver's bench and lashed the reins as Winston centered himself between the noses of the two frightened horses, yanking

their bridles until they kicked their legs free of muck. At first the carriage rocked unsuccessfully. Then James whacked them on their haunches with enough insistence to drive them in the right direction. They slopped their way through the mire, stumbling and rearing up. Like children watching a footrace, we yelled our encouragement.

"Go, girls!" I cried with the others. "Pull harder!"

I doubt the frightened horses could hear us above the commotion, but they lunged more fiercely, and with each step gained, the grip of the river loosened. The carriage nudged forward, then with one last powerful surge from the horses, we broke free of the water. Elijah continued to crack the reins as Winston and James stepped back to let the horses run. I never imagined a cloud of dust swirled from a dry road would make me sob with joy, but I was not alone in my tears. Elijah handled the frantic horses with calm expertise learned through years on his father's knee. In spite of his small stature, he guided them to a halt at the livery. Winston and James caught up with us there and moved quickly to secure the horses to the hitching post. Cuts and bruises were had by all, but no serious injuries were apparent, with the exception of Mabelle, who swayed with grogginess brought on by a bulging knot in the center of her forehead. I was the first to speak.

"We must get all of you back to the safety of Hillcrest. Your wounds can be tended to there." Mud smeared Livie from head to toe, but she appeared unharmed. I pressed my hand to her cheek. "Are you strong enough to make the trip?"

" 'Tain't the first time I tangled with the river, but I hope to high heaven it be the last," Livie said with an anxious smirk. "Every time I think it's gonna swallow me up, it spits me back out again. I is either the luckiest soul alive or the most cursed."

James climbed into the carriage to put his arm around his shaken wife. "Livetta, you sure you is not hurt?"

"I am fine, thanks to you and Winston." Livie shivered into the crook of James' arm. "We may be a mite thick with mud and bruises, but you held our lives in your hands and never let go. You is a brave man . . ."

"James, you no-good buck!" Twitch sloshed from the water's edge, snarling and limping like a beaten dog. "I am gonna whip the hide from your bones and feed it to the hogs!"

James climbed down to meet him face-to-face. “Marse, I was jes’ goin’ to look fo’ you.”

“Nonsense. You went for the ol’ woman instead of me,” he screamed, his eyes wild with fury. “You will pay with your life, as sure as I am standin’ here.”

“I didn’t see you, Marse,” James said, averting his eyes from Twitch. “There was so much screamin’ and cryin’ out, I couldn’t make out one voice from t’other.”

Twitch seized James by his torn shirt. “You lyin’ darky. You will sure enough hear my voice loud and clear when I howl at the sight of your dead body hangin’ from a tree.”

“That’s enough, Twitchell.” Aunt Augusta stood on feeble legs, but her jaw was firm with intent. “None of us saw you or heard your cries for help.”

“I tell you he saw me, Augusta, but he was more concerned about savin’ his own kind. He would watch me drown with a smile on his face, then reap the benefit of an easier life with me at the bottom of the river.”

“Nonsense, I say,” she snapped, sounding stronger. “If what you imply is true, he would have let me drown with you. He saved me and anyone else he could get his hands on. You should be grateful for the breath left in you and not waste it engaged in pointless bellowing. Now unhand him and make yourself useful. There are a great many people around us who need help.”

Twitch obliged by letting go, but not without protest. “No disrespect, Augusta, but this here is Mooney’s buck. He is driven by my whip. Overseein’ is my business and nobody—”

“Don’t dare challenge me, Twitchell,” Aunt Augusta said, narrowing her eyes. “Be gone with you. Time is of the essence in a crisis of this magnitude. Go do some good for someone other than yourself.”

He stepped back, awash with contempt flowing as heavily as the water that dripped from his face, hair, and clothing. He turned to James. “I won’t forget this, boy. You’ll pay another day. I never leave a debt uncollected.” His crooked teeth widened into a seething smile to punctuate his anticipation. “Now come on with me. My buckboard sank in the marsh down yonder. You ain’t helpin’ nobody but me. Your duty is to your master.” As James complied and walked away with him, Twitch swung his leg around and kicked James in the hip. James’s knees buckled, but he never broke stride or acknowledged the aggressive reminder delivered by

his overseer. Twitch shook his wet hair like a mutt caught in a rainstorm, then looked back over his shoulder at Aunt Augusta. His dead eye oozed mucus, in contrast to the renegade glimmer in its counterpart. His message was clear: Aunt Augusta's power no longer intimidated him.

Overcome by a dizzy spell, Aunt Augusta staggered backward. Was it her brush with death or her recognition of Twitch's unleashed danger that caused her to sway from her perch? If not for Livie and me steadying her, she would have toppled from the carriage. She sat for a moment, and with Elijah fanning her with the corner of a quilt, she regained her composure.

"If it suits you, Miz 'Gusta," Winston said. "I will have Elijah drive you and these gals back to de big house. I'll stay and do what I can fo' these poor souls struck by de river."

"I shall stay as well," I said, giving Winston my hand to help me from the carriage. "Perhaps I can aid the injured in some small way. Alert Colt to what has happened. With his medical training, I know he will come immediately to assist in the rescue."

To my surprise, Aunt Augusta did not forbid me my desire. She looked at me through aged eyes, then nodded her approval to Winston. As they rolled off toward the highlands of Hillcrest, a tremor quaked throughout my body. I wish I could have attributed it to the soaked dress hanging from my limbs or the frigid puddle sloshing in my boots; however, it was an undeniable shudder of vulnerability waking in my consciousness. Aunt Augusta's forceful presence, which often had been oppressive and cause for resentment in my life, also afforded me a great deal of protection. Twitch had torn a hole in my blanket of security, and it chilled me. The time had come for me to grow up and rely on myself, to trust the beliefs seeded in me or chance being swept away by the storm hinted at in the wind that shifted from north to south. I turned away from the retreating carriage to face the overturned world spread before me.

Chapter 25

The wall of water that pushed downstream after the ice break receded back within the banks of the river. However, the destruction left in its wake was not so easily tamed. Thirty souls drowned or were missing. Most were slaves who worked in the vicinity of the bridge or along the shoreline, engaged in the tasks of their masters. A handful of white slave drivers and business owners, including Jeremiah Taft of the gristmill, were mourned as tragic losses. In contrast, the deaths of the enslaved were viewed as mere inconveniences until they could be replaced at the next auction. However, inside the quarters of every plantation bordering Echo Ridge, the loss of dear friends and family members struck a harsh blow. Though spared any direct impact, the population of Mud Run cried out in heartache as word of the dead blazed up the mountain like a wildfire.

I shall never forget the magnificent image of Colt riding down from the hills on his stallion. With saddlebags loaded with bandages, ointments, and other medicinal necessities, Colt leapt from his horse and rushed to take me in his arms. Adversity transformed Colt in my eyes, as well as in those he touched with his healing hands.

“I came as soon as I got word,” he said while carefully checking the cuts and welts on my arms and face.

“My injuries are minor and will fade by week’s end,” I said, sinking into the security of his embrace. “Look around us. There are not many as fortunate.”

“Help us, Colton,” Mac Prentiss called from the lumber mill. “My wife’s arm is broken.” I marveled as Colt took charge of setting up a makeshift infirmary in the schoolhouse, treating the injured who arrived helpless and dazed from the stricken part of town. I stood in awe of his gentle expertise and calming presence in the midst of the uproar.

He instructed me to tear linen into strips to aid in treating the deep, penetrating wounds delivered by debris used as weapons by the floodwaters. Lifeless bodies were carried with dignity to the rear of the

building and covered with a heavy tarp to protect them from flies and vultures until family could claim them for burial.

Colt treated both black and white as they were brought to him, and it was not until evening, when I walked to the well for fresh water, that I noticed a group of townsmen gathered near the church. Mr. Snead's wife, Charmaine, was inconsolable with tears.

"John, if she is not seen by a doctor soon, she will bleed to death."

"No hands stained with the blood of a darky will touch my daughter. This self-professed doctor is a disgrace to his family and to this town."

"But, John, she needs a doctor."

"Charmaine, when word reaches Dr. Waverly, he will come to our aid. He is most likely en route at this moment."

"I don't know, John," Mr. Watkins interjected. "Every town along the river will be impacted, including Lows Hollow. He may be busy with injuries there."

"Nonsense," Snead countered, jutting out a stubborn chin. "Echo Ridge was nearest the jam and will be hardest hit. With so many of the county leaders living here, we will be a priority."

His wife knelt over their limp child. "Please, John . . ."

"Charmaine, do you really want Emily lying among the colored? She deserves better. Fate will deliver her entitlement."

I bristled at the venom dripping in his words, but I was too busy for it to matter. When their daughter succumbed to her injuries the following afternoon, I wondered if her death was the *entitlement* they expected. Sadly, it was what fate was forced to deliver on them because of their stubborn refusal of the nondiscriminating help offered them. What a horrifying price to pay for one's ignorance. God rest the innocent soul of the child.

Eight days passed with me at Colt's side, helping him in any way possible. I boiled water, redressed wounds, and dispersed the food rations salvaged from the area of town unharmed by the crested river. Soon supplies trickled in from the surrounding plantations, including a wagonload brought by Winston. Every landowner in the county spared small groups of slaves to aid in the recovery. Although the spring fields were in full labor, they knew their investments depended on the resilience of the town. The dead were buried, the debris stacked and burned. Each day was marked by the sound of hammer and saw busy reinforcing, rebuilding,

rebirthing a town nearly lost. On the evening of the twelfth day, Dr. Waverly arrived on horseback.

“Colt, my boy, you look exhausted,” he said, dismounting his horse to shake Colt’s hand. “You appear overburdened as well, Miss Blessing.”

I motioned to the battered people stretched on blankets strewn on the porch of the schoolhouse, many with children, parents, or spouses in vigil at their side. “The sorrow and strain of the town is worn on every face here, sir.”

“Two of my colleagues will arrive tomorrow with a wagon of medical supplies. I apologize for the delay, but we were hit downriver as well, though not to the extent I see here.” Dr. Waverly hovered over a few of the fallen, checking bandages and examining swollen limbs. “Colt, you have done an exceptional job stabilizing and treating these wounds.”

“I am saddened to say we lost many as well, Doctor,” Colt said with distraught resignation.

He patted Colt on the back sympathetically. “It’s part of the profession, my boy. You never completely callus over those feelings. Learn to take comfort in knowing an untold number of these folks would have perished had you not been here, possessing the knowledge and skill of a healing man. You have a calling, Colt. Don’t let it go to waste slopping hogs.”

Colt was moved by the doctor’s words. There seemed to be a pause of understanding passed between them. Colt’s curls hung long and limp after more than a week of steady toil. Whiskers shadowed his face, and his clothes were musty and stained, yet the aura of a man who had found his passion in life glowed from him.

“Now go home and rest,” Dr. Waverly declared as he turned us around and nudged us toward the stables. He held up a firm hand when Colt started to object.

“Colt, I need you sharp and refreshed. I can take care of things for now. Come back in a few days to give me a hand.”

From nowhere, James appeared with Colt’s horse saddled and ready to go. Colt mounted, then pulled me up behind him. I had never ridden in this fashion, yet it seemed natural to lean between Colt’s shoulders and wrap my arms around his waist. Colt and I both shed what was left of our youth during the flood of Echo Ridge. We rode home in silence, our minds full and bodies exhausted. The crescent moon accompanied us on the last leg of

the journey, until finally the outline of Hillcrest took form in the distance. The sound of our horse must have preceded us, because Winston and Livie both stood in the yard as we rode up.

They rushed to me when Colt lowered me to the ground. He and I held on to each other's hands long enough to convey the good-bye neither of us had the willingness to speak. Words could never fully express what we had experienced together. My fingertips traced every crease and corner of Colt's gentle hand as we finally let go of each other. Then, with a swift kick of his spurs, Colt disappeared into the darkness.

I have no recollection of speaking or moving from where I stood, but when next I looked around, I was sitting at the table in the kitchen. Livie sat alongside me with her arm firmly over my shoulder and holding a cup of tea to my lips. Winston and Elijah shuffled through the back door, both of them hauling a full bucket of water in each hand. Esther Mae tossed a log on the fire beneath a large cauldron of steaming water.

"Do you want this water in de pot or dumped in de tub with de rest?"

"Throw it in de tub," Esther Mae said, motioning toward the second floor where Winston had carried the wooden tub to my bedchamber. "Dat should jes' about do it. Once we pour this pot o' hot water in with de rest, de bath will be soothin' to de touch."

I sipped the warm tea offered by Livie while my bath was prepared. They talked around me as though I was not there, or perhaps my exhaustion made it impossible for me to absorb any conversation directed my way. Livie helped me to my chambers, where she peeled the stained clothes from my weary body. The looking glass on the far wall reflected an unrecognizable image of tangled hair and dusty cheeks moist with perspiration. Sinking into the tepid water, I released a few tears as layers of dirt and sorrow lifted off my skin. I went limp, wishing to never move again. Livie dipped a pail into the water and raised it over my head. I tilted my head back and let the warmth flow through my matted hair.

"Stop, Livie," I said softly. "Do not serve me."

She gently ran her soaped hands through my wet hair. "I am not serving you. I am being your friend."

I closed my eyes and let her care for me. By the time she rinsed the soap from me, I was more alert and rejuvenated. I opened my eyes and saw the tired strain of worry paling her.

“James is well and working on the bridge,” I whispered in gratitude, happy to ease her burdens as well. “The crest of the river is low. He is not in any danger.”

Her hands left me and pressed to her forehead. “Thank you, sweet Jesus,” she said with a sigh of relief. “I wish I could see him.”

“There is talk of the bridge being temporarily secured as soon as tomorrow; then the slaves in town will be sent back to their plantations and replaced by a fresh group to clean up and repair the buildings left standing. For once, the sight of Twitch’s wagon returning home will be a welcome sight.” I reached up and touched her cheek. “You look tired, Liv.”

“We all been through a lot. Miz ’Gusta was rendered to bed fo’ most of the week. Esther Mae says her ribs is hurt bad. She been up and about fo’ a few days now, but only to come down and sit in her chair.”

“And to check on my niece.” Aunt Augusta’s voice came from the doorway. She looked small and bent as she crossed the room. Livie and I stared at her as she approached. Much to my surprise, she sat on the stool next to Livie, and then reached out to stroke my hair.

“I was concerned when Mooney said there was a fever outbreak near town.”

“Yes,” I said, unable to hide my astonishment. “Colt treated two pockets of fever along the marshes of the Moffett plantation to the south. He did not bring the stricken into Echo Ridge, which prevented it from spreading beyond the affected area. His decision proved wise, because there were no outbreaks in town.”

Noting my uncertainty beneath her touch, she withdrew her hand as she spoke. “Thankfully, the sun has been bright and no rain accompanied the flood. Wetter conditions would have made it ripe for a widespread epidemic.”

I nodded in agreement as Livie combed through my scrubbed hair. Aunt Augusta’s sincere interest was difficult to digest. Colt had a way of engaging her in deeply layered conversations; however, my interactions with her reduced me to one of three roles: obeying, explaining, or apologizing. There were never exchanges like this, where my thoughts and observations seemed of value to her. Perhaps seeing me react with purpose in this experience changed me in her eyes, or maybe watching her pulled from the river as helpless as a drenched kitten changed her in mine. Either

way, something between us had shifted, and I am sure she recognized it as well. I grew drowsy and must have nodded off during my conversation with Aunt Augusta, because when the tug of Livie's comb in my hair awakened me, I opened my eyes and Aunt Augusta was gone.

"She is proud of you," Livie said, holding open a towel for me to step into. "Even if you don't think so."

"I am not thinking anything except how wonderful my soft, warm bed will feel beneath these weary bones." I held my grateful hand against Livie's cheek. "Thank you, my dear friend, for being here, providing strength and love when I most needed it."

Livie touched my hand and smiled. "Guess we jes' like doin' fo' each other."

The next morning I was greeted by the gentle coo of a young dove nested in the tree outside my window. Although the hour was early, I was rested and happy to be home. Livie looked at peace on the trundle bed next to me. In the time we were apart, a distinct bump appeared across her waistline, the first outward sign of the baby growing inside her. It comforted me to awake and find her here. In the months since Livie's wedding, I missed the intimacy she and I shared as inseparable friends, so I lay awhile longer and cherished the serenity of the moment.

Eventually Livie stirred, and we dressed and went downstairs. Livie headed for the kitchen to help with the morning preparations. Granny poked her head through the door to greet me with a broad smile.

"Sho' is good to see ya, Miz Hannah. Not a day passed without us frettin' and worryin' over you."

"Thank you, Granny. Being home and breathing in the luscious aroma of your griddle cakes is like stepping through the gates of heaven."

"Go on, now," she said, cackling as she headed back into the kitchen. "Set yo'self down and get ready fo' Granny's finest. Miz 'Gusta is already started." Even Esther Mae, who usually maintained a reserved demeanor, grinned over Granny's shoulder.

No sooner had I joined Aunt Augusta than voices were heard in the front hallway. Livie greeted Colt at the front door and directed him to the dining room. We paused when we first caught sight of one another and exchanged poignant smiles. Clean, rested, and draped in fresh clothing, we were reborn

from the wretched pair that rode in from town the previous night, although sleep and fineries would never redress the horror harboring in our memory.

“I came to check on all of you to be certain you are well before I return to town.”

“We are thankful we were spared from a worse fate.” Aunt Augusta winced as she gingerly shifted in her chair. “Bones and bruises will mend. Mabelle is staying in the root cellar with Granny. Her injuries are the most severe. She has been slow in coming out of her disoriented state.”

“I will go down and have a look at her before I leave,” Colt said, coming to kneel at my side. “I saw Livetta at the door. She appears strong and unaffected. Still, I would advise you to keep her settled and rested for several weeks. How are you?”

“I am fine and in awe of your dedication. Had I known you were leaving, I would have prepared to go with you.”

“I intend to return alone with what medical supplies I have left. Until the risk of fever subsides, I think it’s best that no one comes into town unless warranted by necessity. Perhaps you can tend to those in need here,” he said, nodding in the direction of Aunt Augusta.

“They is comin’ home!” Livie’s voice squealed from the front hallway. “A wagon with James and t’others is rollin’ up the lane!”

We followed Livie out onto the front porch, and sure enough, Twitch was riding in with a wagonload of slaves lent by both plantations to help in town. James’s tired expression broke into laughter as the wagon circled into our yard and he saw Livie running toward him.

Twitch stepped down off the wagon. “All you darkies from the Run, get on your way. I gotta get mine back to West Gate.” He shoved a few Runians who shuffled too slowly for his liking. Then he locked a menacing eye on James and Livie. They walked away arm in arm, unaware of his scrutiny as they disappeared over the knoll toward the cabins below. With one motion, Twitch spun around and unleashed a crack of his whip across the side of his buckboard, snapping the slaves of West Gate to attention. Then with an oracle meant for our witness, he grumbled.

“When we step foot on West Gate, I better not see one of you wastin’ a minute jawin’ with your wenches or pickaninnies. Get straight to the fields, and don’t make me come a-lookin’ for you.”

Twitch walked toward the porch steps, twirling his whip back into loops with crisp expertise. He hung it on his belt and propped one foot on the bottom step. Tucking some snuff under his lip, he angled his eye at Colt.

“That’s the way you gotta drive them whilst I am away. Losin’ some head to help in town has put us behind in our plantin’. Understand, Purebred? If we wanna get them tobacco shoots in the ground, you gotta do more than ride along the rows, lookin’ pretty. You are too soft to fill my shoes, but you are all we have. Willy Jack knows what’s gotta be done, so watch him and learn.”

“What do you mean, *whilst I am away*?” Colt stepped forward to challenge him. “I will be doctoring in town, then down in Lows Hollow. I’ll not be overseeing the fields.”

“That ain’t what your pa says, Purebred. Damn flood is givin’ me a late start, but I have a slave hunt to begin.”

“The bridge will take several weeks, if not a month to restore. You will not get across the Red Hawk this spring. And as you say, we are delayed in getting the tobacco plants in the ground.”

“Your pa suggested I head west into Kentucky so the spring fetchin’ season ain’t lost. Too profitable to let pass. I would rather go south where the flocks start this time of year, but west will have to do. Usually do better there in late summer, when all them who run off from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana is closin’ on the borderland river. Can’t throw a stone without hittin’ one of ’em. Nothin’ but Kentucky runaways this time o’ year, but they pay a mighty good reward all the same. I am fixin’ to ride out in two days.”

“See here,” Colt countered as he marched down the steps to confront Twitch. “All is not measured in gold coins. These flood victims are a priority. I am needed in town, and I will not turn my back on them.”

“Hell, the only thing you have a head for is doctorin’, and you can’t even get that right. Nobody wants you touchin’ their kin after you dipped your hands in darky guts. You ain’t good for nothin’ but horses and pigs now.”

Colt clenched his fist and stepped toward him; however, Aunt Augusta was quick to intervene. “Do not be drawn in, Colt,” she interjected coolly. “Twitchell, be on your way. I am certain you have business elsewhere.”

“That’s right,” Twitch continued, using a defiant grin to bait Colt. “And my business is packin’ the wagon and wranglin’ runaways for a few weeks.

Guess you’re gonna have to pull your weight for a change, Purebred.”

“Stop calling me Purebred!” Colt burst out, grabbing Twitch by his collar and pushing him up against the porch rail. “From now on, you shall show me proper respect. Refer to me by name, and remember *your* business never takes precedence over *mine*. You are the overseer. I am the son!”

Twitch’s face bulged crimson, but his grin grew wider. “Better check with your pa about that,” he said, oozing perverse pleasure.

“Twitchell!” Aunt Augusta’s urgency startled me, but Twitch simply waved her off with his hand.

“No, Augusta. I have been waitin’ for this day to come,” he mused while still in Colt’s grip. “You see, Purebred, it turns out I am the overseer *and* a son. Not pure like you, but a son just the same. You want me to call you by name? How does *brother* suit you?”

“What are you saying?” Colt eased off of him to look squarely at his face.

“Ain’t it a rip?” Twitch’s nostrils flared wildly like a cougar sniffing its kill. “Why do you think my daddy shot my ma? It was because he found out she was layin’ down with your daddy. You see, your daddy is my daddy too. We is the same, me and you. And it’s time you start respectin’ me.” Twitch shoved Colt’s stunned frame aside. He turned his venomous tongue toward Aunt Augusta and me. “It’s time you all start respectin’ me.”

“You are a liar,” Colt said, gulping for breath. “You are not my brother.”

“Half brother, Purebred,” Twitch said snidely. “Go on, tell him, Augusta. Tell him what we’ve known for years: an indiscretion hidden to spare you all the scandal. But then again, what’s wrong with a little secret shared between kin?”

Colt swayed with uncertainty. His eyes flashed to mine, as if asking if I was part of the ruse. Speechless, I shook my head to assure him I was as shocked as he. He then turned his eyes to Aunt Augusta, who leaned against the pillar, her hand pressed to her breast. She did not deny the words, her silence confirming the truth.

Colt bolted toward his horse. With one leap, he was up in the saddle. I cried out his name, not wanting him to leave. I ached to comfort the despair that twisted his face. He spurred his stallion into an instant gallop.

“Colt!” I cried out again, but he charged down the road toward town, his stallion kicking up clods of mud in its wake. Twitch walked a few steps

across the yard, enjoying the view. When he turned back in the direction of the porch, he stared at us with the gleam of a man holding four aces in a poker game. He tongued a pinch of snuff beneath his lower lip, then spit it out. “What’s a little secret between kin? Ain’t that right, Augusta?”

Aunt Augusta took me by the arm and abruptly steered me to the door. It was as though there was a threat veiled in his words, but in all the confusion, I had no time to make sense of it. His taunting gaze glimmered at me and stayed in my mind’s eye long after the door closed behind me.

Chapter 26

O*h, dear Colt . . . my treasured friend, my devoted family. What state of mind must you be in?* How I longed to have Winston drive me into town so I could be by his side and ease the pain cast upon him. Although she shared my concern, Aunt Augusta forbade me from going after him. My intention was to disregard her decree until she stressed the danger posed to Livie and her child if the fever was to follow me home.

As shocked as I was with the revelation, the fact that Uncle Mooney shared improprieties with a married woman did not surprise me. The memory of him on top of Fatima was all I needed to accept the possibility. Deep down inside, I knew Colt could come to terms with the indiscretion; however, learning Twitch was his half brother brought with it more than emotional upheaval. The reality also meant that he faced a lifetime at odds with Twitch over decisions, both personal and business-related, with regard to the plantation. I cannot imagine the distress of being joined at the hip with my lifelong nemesis.

“Shoot,” Livie declared upon my confiding the secret. “It’s like lookin’ over yo’ shoulder and seein’ a worm crawl out yo’ ass. You see’d it come from the same body, but it be so vile and wicked, you can’t believe you and he is made o’ the same blood.”

As distressed as I was, Livie’s vivid portrayal of the situation made me smile. She had a way of interjecting humor into any situation, which kept my troubles from overwhelming me. She often told me it was easy to cry tears of pain, or drop to your knees when under heavy burden, but a good laugh now and again not only soothed the soul, but was a sure sign of unyielding inner strength. She was right.

“Mista Colt will be fine,” Livie said nonchalantly as she buttoned the back of my blouse as I dressed. “He ain’t the first to learn of a bastard brother, ’specially on a plantation. Some find out the slave chilluns they played with when they was pint-sized was really their own flesh and blood. Lies and secrets can be hard to reconcile, but sometimes ’tain’t the lie itself

that brings on the grief. It's the knowin' you been lied to that delivers you the most hurtin'."

A pang of guilt rose inside of me. "Lord knows I am not defending Uncle Mooney, but perhaps concealing the truth was meant to protect Colt."

"Protect him from what?" Livie said, arching her eyebrow.

"Well, perhaps shame. Or worry. Maybe even insecurity."

Livie chuckled and shook her head. "White people sho' is scared of the strangest things. Them ain't nothin' but feelings. Try facin' a whip 'cuz yo' cotton basket is an ounce or two short o' pickin's. Don't matter if you is sick with fever or round with child; it be no protection from twenty lashes. Ever been surrounded by a passel of paddy rollers jes' because you dared to stroll in the evenin' air? Now, them's a sight to stand yo' hair on end. So is the sight of a screamin' slave child as his mama and daddy is dragged off to auction. Now, them is souls that need protection. Not feelings. Slave folk ain't scared o' feelings. We embrace 'em, good and bad, 'cuz our feelings is the only rightful things we have that is all our own."

"Sorry, Liv," I said with some deserved humility. "I sometimes forget how insulated I am from harsh struggle."

"Guess when you is born a slave, you learn mighty quick there is no protection from what life means to bring yo' way," she said earnestly. "You jes' learn to face it as best you can. Mista Colt is a better man than Marse. Nothin' is gonna change that fact. What white folks think is protectin' is jes' a cowardly way of bidin' fo' time. Only makes the truth harder to swallow when it's served up to you. Keepin' him in the dark left him unprepared. Shouldn't do such a thing to someone you care about."

I took Livie's hand tenderly in mine. "What about between friends?"

"Shouldn't be no truth hidden between friends neither."

I hugged Livie tightly, afraid of what was to follow. "Will you forgive me for being white?"

"What?" Livie was thoroughly confused and flabbergasted.

"What I mean is, please forgive me for trying to protect you from your feelings. They are yours and no one else's. I have no right to keep them from you, even though Marcus asked me not to tell you."

"Marcus!"

"Marcus is alive." I smiled through tender eyes. "He was here."

Livie sprang from my arms and darted around the room, not knowing where to point her excitement.

“My brother is alive!” she sang out. “Where is he? Did he make it to freedom? I tol’ you he would come back to deliver me North, jes’ like he promised.”

After a minute of pure ecstasy, Livie realized I was not dancing with her. I shook with utter joy, knowing my news was a dream come true for her, but she had yet to know the whole story. She could see it in my eyes. In midtwirl, she wobbled to a halt.

“What do you mean, he *was* here?”

She sank down on the chair next to my bed as I crossed the room and knelt beside her. She did not offer me her hand, but I clasped it anyway. I told her how I stumbled upon Marcus in the cave and shared his chronicle of making safe passage to the North. She was not surprised at his determination to trek south and lead the way for others to follow, but she was distraught with me abiding by Marcus’s wish of not telling her of his presence until he returned.

“He is alive,” she said with emotion cresting along her dark lashes. “My brother is alive. My heart is filled with so much joy, it’s gonna spill out on the floor.”

I was overcome with such relief at finally sharing my secret that I let my head fall in her lap. Her trembling hand tucked under my chin and lifted my eyes to hers. “You never should have kept the truth from me, Hannah. No matter what Marcus made you promise.”

“His journey becomes more dangerous with each step he takes south,” I said in explanation. “Even if you did not follow him, at the very least, you would be sick with worry.”

“I would rather suffer the pangs o’ worry than live in the grip o’ heartache, thinkin’ Marcus must be dead after all this time.” Livie’s touch softened as she cradled my head back into her lap.

“Marcus is a courageous and loving man. He did not want to raise your hopes,” I revealed beneath her forgiving fingertips as they stroked my hair. “In the event he does not make it back, he did not want you suffering his loss for a second time.”

“He’s gonna make it back,” she said in a comforting tone. “You’ll see. He knows the way now.”

“Thank you for not being angry with me, Liv.”

“Anger can’t take root fo’ long when I know yo’ heart meant well.” Livie’s voice trailed off as she closed her eyes and basked in the happiness my confession brought her. “But don’t you never keep nothin’ from me again. The truth ain’t always easy, but it’s all we got that’s real. You and me is real, ain’t we? Real friends, I mean.”

My heart cranked tighter as a greater secret nudged my conscience. It was the only remaining untruth between us, but it was not one softened by a happy revelation. “Of course we are real, Livie, but I pray your belief in me is strong enough to weather my imperfection.”

Livie stiffened in her chair when she saw me struggling with another confession. “There’s more?”

I answered her by squeezing her hands in mine. I lifted off my knees and sat on the bed to face her. “You are right: The truth is not always easy, but because we are friends, I must confess one last concealment. My only intention was to bring you happiness. At the time, I believed the method was meaningless, but afterward my instincts told me otherwise.”

Livie sat motionless as I explained the deal I struck with Uncle Mooney so he would grant permission for James and her to be married. I stressed the agreement had no merit because I did not truly own her, and therefore any paperwork I signed would be null and void. Livie stroked her belly with increasing anxiety; all the while her eyes glimmered hot tears.

“Don’t you see, Livie,” I said as desperate nausea swirled in my gut. “It was a trick. He thinks he has rights to your child, so he gave blessing to your marriage. Uncle Mooney would have never agreed for James to join with a Runian. He is greedy and needed to believe he would gain from the union. Otherwise, he would have coupled James within his own stock.”

Livie stared at me without speaking. The more I explained how clever my plan had been, the weaker it seemed even to me. I was gambling with Livie’s unborn child. What had I done? Her silence crushed against me. Livie’s thoughts were masked behind glazed eyes that refused to look in my direction. She stood and walked toward the door.

“Please don’t be upset, Liv,” I said, as a shell hardened around her. “We both know he has no right to your child.”

Livie paused in the doorway. “*You* have no right to my child either,” she said without turning around. “But tossin’ my child’s fate to the wind is the

same as snatchin’ it from my arms like any coldhearted massa would do.”

“Livie, don’t say that,” I pleaded. “I have never treated you like my slave.”

“You jes’ did, *Miz* Hannah.” Livie delivered her point with a mocking curtsy, then slammed the door behind her. Its echo left us divided and alone with our separate heartaches.

I never knew how lonely alone could feel until Livie walked out my door. I had made a grave mistake. The fact that my action was well-meaning did not soften the blow it delivered to our intimate connection. Livie felt betrayed. The more I apologized and explained my intention was meant to help her, the farther away she pulled. Her distance was emotional, not physical. Each morning she came to me, as was her routine, then returned to Mud Run in the evening. Livie moved through her chores and tended to my needs quietly and methodically. She was not punishing me with silence or wearing her disappointment for all to see. It would not have been her character to do so. However, it pained me when she spoke with careful respect and trepidation in the same manner that Esther Mae spoke to Aunt Augusta.

I was crushed, and had no one to blame but myself. Livie and her child were at risk because of me. What I mistook for cleverness was nothing more than naïveté. Did I really believe Uncle Mooney would allow me to outsmart him? Authenticity of documents would be of little challenge to a man of his disrepute. At the time, I remember thinking that as the seasons of life passed, eventually all of West Gate would be in Colt’s hands, making it a nonissue in my mind. However, the emergence of Twitch as Colt’s brother, and a potential heir to Uncle Mooney’s wealth and property, sent a terrifying tremor through me. My salvation from panic was in the hope of Marcus returning to lead Livie north. I had long harbored the secret hope of Livie choosing not to go with him. Perhaps she would be happy and content to stay with me and her new family. Now her exodus was inevitable. Until then, I would do everything in my power to heal the deep wound lacerating our relationship.

“Pokin’ a sore only makes it hurt all the more,” Livie finally stated one afternoon. She was weary of my tears and relentless remorse. “Leave it be. Talkin’ at me jes’ keeps it swirlin’ around inside o’ me.”

“Please believe I never meant to betray or disrespect you,” I said, sitting across from her in the sewing room. “All I can do is beg for your forgiveness.”

Without looking up, Livie continued to rock in her chair. “Even the deepest cuts can heal if washed clean and given air to breathe. Barely leave a scar at all. Yo’ words of sorrow and pure intention washed the wound; now you gots’ta let it breathe, Hannah. Pickin’ a scab is only gonna make it leave a bigger scar.”

Her rocking chair slowly creaked to a halt. She lifted her eyes from her sewing and looked over at me to gauge my understanding. I nodded contritely, knowing it was all I could hope for, and more than I deserved.

The distant tobacco fields grew greener, marking spring’s surrender to summer. Colt had traveled downriver with Dr. Waverly when word was sent of a fever outbreak in the town of Lows Hollow. He did not return to the plantation; therefore, I wrote letters of encouragement and support that were delivered by Winston when he shuttled slaves back and forth to aid in the repair of Echo Ridge.

Dearest Colt. Can you feel me embracing you across the hills and valleys stretched between us? My heart aches to comfort you in your time of need. I long to see your tender smile to assure me you are well and without torment. Please come home. Until then, you are in my heart always.

More than three weeks passed before Colt’s first response came to me. Relief eased through me when in his words I sensed an acceptance of what had transpired, and a focus on searching for a positive outcome. He wrote:

Remember our conversation about boots, dear Hannah? You told me a man cannot dance if he is wearing boots that do not fit him. I confide to you that I can no longer walk, run, or even sleep in the ill- fitting boots procured for me by my father. Therefore, I need some time away to discover the man I am meant to be. So the next time you see me, which hopefully will be before the autumn harvest, I will be walking comfortably in a self-chosen pair of soles that will carry me onward. Until my return, I will seek inspiration and comfort from the portrait of your sweet face resonating in my memory.

Melancholia became my companion. The two people in this world I was closest to were building lives separate from mine. Livie would soon have a child with James, and Colt was seeking a life far removed from what bound

us together here in the small confines of our plantations. Would he still look at me with the same eyes when he returned? Or would I be a painful reminder of the stilted life he needed to shed?

One afternoon in mid-August, the serenity of the day was assaulted by the howl of Twitch lashing his team of horses. The misshapen wooden frame affixed atop his wagon wobbled back and forth as it bounced up the dirt road from town. I shaded my eyes with my fan as the wagon tilted around the corner near our fence, then leveled as he plowed on toward West Gate.

“Never thought I’d be glad to see that ol’ snake again,” Livie said as she brought a pitcher of lemonade to the table where I sat on the porch. “Crazy Willy Jack is ten times worse when Marse is away. Guess in his mind it keeps him in Marse’s good graces to whup twice as many and feed ’em half as much. Willy Jack is a fool to think it makes him better than a slave. Marse would grind him into the dirt if the mood strikes him. Willy Jack jes’ don’t know it yet.”

“Aren’t Willy Jack’s driving methods tempered by the fact he has family in the fields?” I said, filling my glass as Livie sat down on the steps. “He must be merciful to his own.”

Livie’s words flowed naturally for the first time in weeks. “Good and bad comes in every skin color. Willy Jack is a rotten chestnut. The smell o’ blood makes him drive all the harder. He had ol’ Pepper Lee whupped and rubbed down with salt brine, three times over, ’cuz he broke a hoe and lost part o’ the morning till James got it fixed. He once made his own son, Willy Boy, bite the head off every plump hornworm the boy missed pullin’ off the tobacc’y leaves. They say it was near half o’ bucket in all, and Willy Boy couldn’t keep a morsel o’ food down fo’ two weeks.”

“Speaking of keeping food down, I have not seen you eat a thing today, Livie.”

Livie rubbed the front of her dress where the curve of her belly was growing more defined. “I am a mite tired and queasy, is all.”

“Go rest in your cabin while I collect berries in the upper meadow,” I said, finishing my lemonade. “I wager that one of Granny’s berry cobblers may coax your appetite back to favor.”

Livie’s laughter sprinkled over me like rain on a wilting daisy. I drank in every drop, happy to feel the hurt between us beginning to ease. Without

much prodding, she took me up on my suggestion and walked down over the hill. My mood was lightened with the return of Livie's humor, so with basket in hand, I strolled merrily through the rows of tobacco lining the upper field, then through the woods toward the meadow. The larks and sparrows welcomed me with their song. I loved the activity of life ever-present there among the grass and flowers. I plucked yellow dandelions and braided the stems as I lay down on the spot where I first met Livie and Marcus. I closed my eyes and felt the firmness of his hand on my arm and the intensity of his eyes when they penetrated me as I knelt to aid his wounded sister. Here in the meadow, I could indulge my remembrance and let it rush over me.

"Girl, seein' you sprawled out on the grass makes me tight in the belt buckle."

My eyes popped open to the sight of Twitch standing over me. His hands brushed inward across his thighs to join at the front of his belt. He tugged his belt down slightly as he shifted his hips to punctuate his obvious point. I scrambled to my feet and headed in the opposite direction. His hand took hold of my basket and pulled me back.

"I am headed up to Emerald Cove to wash the stink off me. Care to join me?"

I attempted to tug my basket from his grip, but the more we scuffled, the greater his arousal. "You disgust me, Twitch."

"Come on, Hannah," he groaned as he pressed up against me. "Let me wash your sins away."

Was he reading my mind? Did he know the thoughts I harbored within me? I stiffened as he let one hand move around my waist and slip down the back of my skirt. I yanked my basket from his other hand and swung it as hard as I could, hitting him squarely on the side of his face. His dead eye never saw it coming. He stumbled backward, but then came back at me. I swung at him again, but this time he caught me by the wrist, twisting it so I was forced to my knees in front of him.

"Let me dip you in the cool water and search your moist nakedness for sin."

I stared up at him, afraid but still defiant. "Seek and cleanse your own sins."

“The sins of the parent are passed to the child,” he said with mock amusement. I thought he was talking about his mother and Uncle Mooney until he continued. “Let me rinse you clean of your parents’ sin.”

“Are you drunk, Twitch?” I tried standing, but his grip kept me in submission. “You are not making any sense.”

“I am drunk with satisfaction,” he snorted. “Satisfaction that a bastard like me is held in higher regard than Southern traitors.”

“What are you talking about?”

He knelt down to get closer. “I met someone who knew your ma and pa. He knew ’em real good. He was there the night they was killed.”

I sank back on my heels. So little was ever said about my mother and father or the accident that took their lives. Fear was replaced with intrigue as I waited for Twitch to continue. He was eager to oblige me.

“The man I met is from Kentucky and is a slave catcher from way back. He told me about a young couple named Blessing who were known to harbor runaways. They were abolitionist lawbreakers, and they had a baby girl who was shipped off to kin after they were killed.”

I shook my head with confusion. “My father was a Baptist preacher.”

“Oh, he was a preacher all right,” Twitch growled. “Preachin’ the word of Northern sympathizers. No wonder Augusta disowned your mama. Ain’t no shame lower than lovin’ a darky.”

“This man you speak of . . . he saw the wagon accident?”

“He said it weren’t no accident.” He smiled, gleaning pleasure in each piece of devastating news delivered. “Said him and a group of patrollers was chasin’ down a passel of runaways makin’ tracks toward the Ohio River. They trailed ’em as far as your folks’ property. The patrollers surrounded the place, but your ma and pa took off in a buckboard with the darkies hidden under a blanket in the back. The posse followed on horseback, and when they caught up with ’em a few miles down the road, your pa wouldn’t stop the wagon. He kept pushin’ on toward the river. So this fellow decided it was time to put an end to your folks’ interference by forcin’ ’em off the road and into a gully. The wagon turned over three times, killing the whole lot on the spot, except your ma. She lay there with her eyes open, whispering words of prayer that her child would be protected and cared for. They spat on her moaning body, then threw the crushed runaways up over their horses. They didn’t mind none, ’cuz a dead runaway

brings the same reward as a live one. By the time they rode off, your ma was dead too.”

Satisfied with the damage he wrought, Twitch let go of my wrist and let me fall back into the grass. I curled like a hedgehog protecting itself from a predator, and did not relax until Twitch lost interest in my suffering and walked off. I lay motionless in the meadow, detached from the flurry of the songbirds feasting on the berries strewn around me from my overturned basket.

Chapter 27

Livie came looking for me when I did not come down for dinner. I could not eat while I was still digesting the story Twitch had fed me in the meadow. I feigned sleep until she tucked my blanket around me, then left me to my slumber. I crawled out of bed and sat at my window, watching the moon rise out of the shadows. When Livie returned in the morning, she found me asleep on my window bench. She nudged me gently.

"Mama?"

I did not realize what I had said until Livie's puzzled face took form in my sleepy gaze. "Tell me what's troublin' you, Hannah," Livie said, sitting down next to me. "Somethin' happened yesterday; I can feel it in my bones."

We had not shared confidences since the hurt I had caused her, so I hesitated. When she put her arm around me to reassure, the story came spilling out of me along with a flow of tears, both hers and mine. She brought a basin of cool water to splash on my cheeks, keeping a tender hand of support on my back. Much of my confusion was sorted out after revealing it to Livie. No longer overwhelmed with emotion, I was reborn. So many questions in my life now had answers.

"No one ever speaks of them," I said after patting my face dry. "Especially Aunt Augusta. The shame and anger she must harbor toward my mother explains the cool distance she maintains with me. My presence is threatening to her. If my parents' activities were ever revealed, the scandal would put a black mark on Aunt Augusta's reputation. She would be humiliated and possibly ostracized. She and my mother may have been complete opposites in their beliefs, but as my only living relative, Aunt Augusta was saddled with my guardianship. No wonder she hates me so."

"She does not hate you, Hannah. I know that fo' certain."

"Everything is so clear to me," I said with grounded confidence. "Mabelle let it slip a couple of times but was hushed quiet, once by Granny Morgan, then by Aunt Augusta. She told me my parents were a blessing, just like our name, and she said I remind her of them."

“Come with me,” Livie said, grabbing my hand and leading me out of the room.

“Where are we going?”

“Stay quiet,” she whispered as we tiptoed past Aunt Augusta’s closed bedroom door. “We is goin’ to the root cellar to talk with ol’ Mabelle.”

Mabelle had been cared for by Granny Morgan since the flood. Granny said most days Mabelle drifted in and out of consciousness. We were not optimistic about her recovery because of Mabelle’s advanced age and the severity of her head injury. Still, Granny was grateful James had snatched Mabelle before she was swept down river to a watery grave. Mabelle’s rescue gave Granny the opportunity to tend to her beloved sister during her final days.

Livie cracked open the kitchen door a sliver, so we could see Granny poking at the fire under her cook pot. “Um, um,” Granny said, not realizing she had an audience. “Another log might smolder you high enough to do some good.” She waddled out of the back door toward the woodshed, giving us the chance to scurry across the kitchen and down the steps to the root cellar. The glow of a small grease lamp lit the dank room filled with baskets of potatoes, turnips, and a host of other vegetables and fruits. In the far corner was Granny’s bed, where Mabelle lay sleeping.

“The quarters is always abuzzin’ with gossip o’ one sort or another,” Livie whispered as we crept to Mabelle’s side. “Some true; some ain’t. Mostly I pay no mind to none of it, but I heared somethin’ once about this ol’ gal that’s got me a-wonderin’.”

“What did you hear?” I said, kneeling with her at Mabelle’s bedside.

“I was passin’ by Pepper Lee’s fire one night on my way to see James shortly after the shuckin’, and he said, clear as a cricket, ‘Poor Mabelle may be blind, but I hear she is the only one o’ us dat sees de road north.’ The folks at the fire laughed real hard and said Pepper Lee was full o’ molasses, but maybe Mabelle got some knowin’ while she be livin’ in town.”

“Who dat thar?” Mabelle’s voice was weak and her breathing labored, but her vacant eyes sparkled from the shadows.

I placed my hand over hers for recognition. “It’s Hannah. I am here with Livetta.”

“What you want with a dyin’ ol’ woman, chile?”

“Is it true my parents were killed while aiding some runaways?”

“Lord, how did you find out?” The question pulled Mabelle out of her fog, although her voice remained feeble and barely audible. “Folk round here know better than to tell you such a thing.”

“I want to know more, Mabelle.”

The pause was so long, I thought she had slipped back into unconsciousness, but with a startling hitch in her breath, she spoke again. “Dey was sent by God, dey was. Yo’ papa’s notions got him run off to Kentuck, and your mama followed afta him. Dey woulda hanged ’em both from the highest tree in the Ridge if dey stayed here. Yo’ mama made a beautiful quilt and sent it back to Miz ’Gusta as a peace offerin’. But Miz ’Gusta made certain she displayed outrage fo’ all de town to see when she throwed dat quilt to de slaves. Dey been makin’ dat quilt ever since. You see, yo’ mama’s quilt had de signs sewn into de design.” Her chuckle was choked by a heavy cough. I rubbed Mabelle’s arm until she caught her breath. “Jes’ follow de signs through de mountains. It was right under dere noses all along. Both my boys is free now.”

“I thought they were sold to a landowner in Mississippi.”

“Dat what dey want folks to think.” She smiled. “Better to say dey was sold south than have empty fields trampled by de feet of slaves followin’ my boys to de Promised Land.”

I looked at Livie, whose eyes were wide with amazement at Mabelle’s revelations. She leaned over to me and whispered, “If this is true, then why isn’t every slave in the county long gone?”

Mabelle winced at the doubt in Livie’s voice. “Nobody knows about de signs unless dey open dere ears to de songs I sing, and sees what a blind woman sees. Some folks believe de only Promised Land fo’ coloreds is in de sweet by-and-by. But de land o’ milk and honey ’tain’t that far away. But only dem with de ears to hear and de heart bold enough to believe is delivered. ’Tain’t common know-how. It’s a secret you gots’ta search fo’; that way Massa can’t see. Massa can’t stop nothin’ he can’t see. If de ache fo’ freedom is deep in a soul, den de words o’ de spirituals speaks to ’em and tells ’em what to do.”

“Who down thar!” Granny Morgan stepped heavy on the steps, causing Livie and me to jump to our feet. “Miz Hannah, this ain’t no place fo’ you. Filled with dust and death. Miz ’Gusta will have my hide if you catch a germ down here.”

“We are visiting with Mabelle.”

“Pay no mind to a blind woman’s tall tales,” Granny said, shooing us up the stairs. “Her head is knocked senseless. Now, leave her with what little strength she got left.”

I could barely contain myself until we got back to my room. Once behind closed doors, I clapped my hands with the exuberance of a child and threw myself on the bed, laughing and kicking. Echo Ridge’s elite were outwitted by those they believed lowlier than animals crawling in the dirt. So sly, so secretive, so defiantly brave.

“You can’t go on about it, girl,” Livie said, growing serious. “It’s dangerous fo’ you and everyone else.”

I understood her concern, but was swept up in elation. “Don’t fret, Livie. I am not going to sing it from the rooftops.”

The revelation redefined the world around me, as did the secret Twitch attempted to use as a weapon to wound me. He meant to crush me with this dark secret, but now I was overjoyed. He had given me the key to my past and a glimpse of who I was and where I came from. “I finally have something to sink my roots into. A legacy left by my parents that I can be proud of.”

Livie’s eyes softened with tenderness. She tucked a dangling strand of hair behind my ear and brushed a finger from cheek to chin. “You always had it rooted in you, girl. Look at what you did fo’ me.”

“But it’s not enough,” I said with quiet conviction. “You are still here, living as a slave. I have selfishly hoped you would never leave. I love you, Livie, but you are not mine to keep. I must help you move on to a life of freedom. Only then do I deserve to be called *friend*.”

Aunt Augusta noted the change in me immediately. I held my chin high and no longer shrank in her presence. I was amused by her attempts at intimidation, although I was careful to hide my reaction. In the following days, I analyzed our Runians to see if I could detect an undercurrent of knowledge in anyone’s behavior. I spent hours in the sewing room, wrapped in the quilts born of my mother’s cleverness. I thought about the many quilts cast off by Aunt Augusta because of stitching errors, and wondered if

the slave girls were purposeful in their efforts, knowing the quilts would be turned out to the slaves. I saw conspiracy everywhere until Livie pointed out the obvious.

“If all o’ Mud Run had hint of a freedom trail, there would be nothin’ but empty shacks and overgrown fields to show for it. I been here mo’ than a year and I ain’t heared nothin’ of the sort. Why would ol’ Mabelle stay with Massa Watkins if she could be in the Promised Land with her sons? Don’t make no sense at all.”

“Maybe she could not risk it because she was blind,” I speculated.

“Or maybe it’s jes’ a yarn she tells herself to soften the blow of losin’ her only chilluns to the auction block.”

We did not get the chance to ask Mabelle any more questions about her revelation. She died early the next morning, on the first day of September. Aunt Augusta had her buried in the slave graveyard, where Granny wept and bid her farewell. “See you on de other side, sister. We will all join hands in de land o’ milk and honey.”

Runians young and old gathered for the funeral, held in the evening after the day’s work was complete. Winston spoke reverently of the “simple singer of songs,” and although Aunt Augusta nodded respectfully, I smiled, knowing she was clueless to his innuendo. Uncle Mooney permitted a small group of his elder slaves to attend as the sun sank behind the mountains in the distance. I sat in the carriage with Aunt Augusta a short distance from the gathering in our usual spot for such occasions. Twitch sat impatiently on his horse in the field opposite us, passing the time by staring in my direction. I kept my bonnet pulled low, not giving him the pleasure of my discomfort. As fate would have it, when Mabelle was lowered into the ground, tears bit at the corners of my eyes, so I shifted away from the sadness and found myself looking in Twitch’s direction. He was waiting for a chance to catch my eye and pass me a vile message. Twitch dropped a hand to his belt buckle and gave it a slow tug. I looked away, but his dirty stare lingered in my mind.

I had a fitful night of tossing in my bed. So much had been revealed to me, only to raise other questions. Twitch had become so brazen that my heightened instincts grew razor sharp at the threat he presented to me. With a head filled with mournful spirituals and glimpses of Twitch shifting in his saddle, I finally fell into a deep slumber, until an intuitive sensation stirred

me before dawn. My eyes searched the darkened room. I held my breath to peruse the uneasy stillness. A floorboard creaked in the far corner near the window. My heart sprang to a gallop. It punched so hard against my chest, I thought it would burst through my thin cotton gown. Was I dreaming? Movement in the shadows hastened my breath. If Twitch expected to find me lying here, helpless to his assault, then he underestimated my potent will. I would meet him straight on and fight. “Reveal yourself, whoever you are.”

The figure pounced on me before I sat upright, the weight of him pinning me down. His gruff hand clamped over my mouth before I could scream. Hot, panting breath blew against my neck and the scratch of whiskers rubbed raw against my cheek.

“Quiet!” the voice commanded in a tone just above a whisper. “Calm down, and quit kickin’!”

Every inch of me flailed to break free. The curve of the face in the darkness leaned closer to me. I twisted my head from his mouth, but the hand squeezed my jaw to keep me from turning away. Oddly, the approaching lips did not seek mine. They brushed along my cheek and hovered at my ear.

“Girl, you is harder to hold on to than a spooked mare.”

Marcus! Shadows cast by the moonlight fell across his face as he lifted his head to reveal his sparkling eyes. Each of us trembled in the darkness, pressed so close a blade of grass could not have fallen between us.

“Hush now, girl,” he said, lifting his hand from my mouth. “Didn’t mean to harm you. I jes’ didn’t want you to wake the house before seein’ it was me.”

“You frightened me,” I whispered as he eased upright. “I thought it was . . . Oh, Marcus.” I raised and touched my fingertips to his cheek. “Thank God you made it back.”

“We ain’t got much time,” he said, beckoning me from my bed. “The end is near fo’ some decent folk if we don’t move quick. Take me to Livetta.”

I rushed to my wardrobe to throw on a dress. “Wear somethin’ dark in color,” he said, turning away to protect my privacy. “So it’s easier to move in the night without notice.”

We wisped through the house and out the back door in silence. Moonlight bathed over us as I took his hand and led him across the yard. We ran down

the hill and under the tree cover of Mud Run. If not for the urgency, I would have enjoyed anticipating Livie's reaction when I delivered Marcus to her door. Accompanied by a chorus of tree frogs, we hurried along the rows of slumbering cabins. As we ran, I pointed to where Livie's cabin peeked through the hickories. When we reached her doorstep, Marcus gently intercepted my hand before I could knock.

"Let me take cover behind them shrubs over yonder, in case anyone else in the quarters stirs. Can't chance bein' seen."

I nodded, then paused long enough for him to scoot behind the huckleberry bushes growing off the rear corner of the cabin. When Marcus was out of sight, I tapped on Livie's door. I heard no activity within, so I knocked harder. I heard the sound of mumbling voices, followed by the thump of bare feet crossing the floor.

"Miz Hannah?" James squinted through sleepy eyes. "What's wrong? Is dere trouble up at de big house?"

"Livie's brother is here," I said in a cautious undertone while waving my hand for Marcus to join us. "We must come in."

James stepped back inside the cabin to let me pass, all the while eyeballing Marcus as he came around the corner behind me. Several pine knots smoldered in the hearth, casting a dim light across the room where Livie was crawling out of bed.

"Hannah, what is you doin' down here this time o' . . ." Livie froze as Marcus appeared in her doorway. She cocked her head to the right and peered out of uncertain eyes. I feared she would cry out, but an aura of caution enveloped her. She took one tentative step toward Marcus, followed by another. I stepped back so Livie could get a good look at him, and when he smiled, she leapt into his arms.

Marcus held on to Livie as she sobbed against his chest. With tears glistening in his eyes, he reached over and shook James's hand. Overcome by her brother's return, Livie was steadied by Marcus and me as we settled at the table, where we talked in hushed voices. We were thrilled by the sight of him, and our eyes did not blink while Marcus told Livie about his escape to the North and his first steps on free soil.

"My feet didn't feel no different, but my heart sure enough did," he said with a huge grin. "And I aim to lay tracks for anyone who wants to do the same."

My heart raced when he told of near capture by patrollers to the south. Tears rolled down my cheeks as he wept for those lost to the rigors of the journey. Within me, a wildfire of admiration grew in intensity with each word Marcus uttered. The sensation was disconcerting, but quickly subsided when I realized Marcus's appearance meant Livie and I would soon say good-bye.

"Are we leavin' tonight?" Livie asked, squeezing up and down Marcus's arm, as though still needing physical proof of his return.

"Can't leave yet. Things took a mighty strange turn a couple o' days ago when I was takin' five runaways as far as the mountain pass to the west. Once I got them on their way, I was gonna double back fo' Livetta." Marcus paused and looked over at James. "And her man, if he chooses."

James put his hand on Livie's shoulder and nodded. "We is a family. Me and Livetta is gonna build a home together up north and watch our chile grow up free."

Livie took his hand with a nod of agreement, then looked to me with soft confession. Our time together was nearing its end. The twinge in my breast gave me premonition of my coming heartbreak. Emotion pressed between us until Marcus continued his story.

"Jes' after sunup two mornings past, we was settlin' in the loft of a barn out in the foothills. The barn belongs to . . . well, let's jes' say a *friend*. The building sits directly across the road from a livery stable, so I was keepin' safe watch from the loft when a big buck rode in on a wagon. He stopped at the livery to fix a broken shoe on one o' the horses. Said his massa was waitin' fo' him down at the inn yonder, havin' breakfast and a hot bath. The livery boy come out to help 'em 'cuz nobody else was around. From outta nowhere, a white man showed up with a gun and tol' them to get on round back. I thought the white man was a paddy roller, but turned out he was a slave wrangler. The buck put his hands high in the air, and says he is on Massa's business. His hands was shakin' when he reached in his coat pocket and gave the wrangler the day pass his massa signed fo' him, so he wouldn't have no trouble. The white man yanked the pass outta that slave's hand and shoved it in his own pocket, laughin' and sayin' he don't see no papers. Then he hit that buck upside the head with the barrel of his shotgun. The slave started a-beggin', 'Please don't steal me off. I gots a wife and chilluns back on Massa's plantation.' But the wrangler pressed his gun to

the po’ boy’s head and say his chilluns is gonna have a dead daddy if he don’t move around back. Then he pointed his gun at the livery boy, who stood there tremblin’ like a lost pup. He marched them behind the livery, and in three blinks, a closed wagon come rollin’ out. The cries of them men, plus one or two more, called from inside the wagon as it rode off. I decided then and there to let the ones I was with move north on their own so I could follow the wrangler and save them men from a fate worse than hangin’. He rode in north o’ town here, but I lost his trail in the dark.”

When Marcus paused, a sick notion nudged me. “Did the man who stole the slaves have only one eye?”

Marcus’s head jerked up. “Like somebody dug one out with an ice pick.”

“Marse,” James grumbled. “That’s why he got me makin’ him all those chains befo’ he goes on his trips. I figured he sold the ironwork fo’ extra money.”

“You know this varmint?”

“He’s the overseer fo’ Massa Reynolds’ place over yonder,” Livie said, motioning in the direction of West Gate. “James has felt the cut of his whip mo’ than once.”

Marcus’s expression was keen with excitement. “Have you seen any new faces in the stock over there? Maybe Dead Eye said he bought ’em.”

James shook his head. “Ain’t nobody new around here. He brags on catchin’ runaways and returnin’ dem fo’ hefty reward money. He comes home with an empty wagon, far as I know.”

“But what if the wagon ain’t empty? Maybe he steals colored folk and hangs on to ’em long enough fo’ their massa to post ’em as runaways.”

“And if nobody comes lookin’ fo’ them,” James added. “Marse can auction ’em off in Kentucky. Nobody round here would know nothin’.”

Marcus paced as he considered the possibility. “It be hard to keep a passel of slaves quiet and out o’ sight. Where would he keep them fo’ a spell without folks takin’ notice?”

Suddenly, a thought sparked in my mind. “The shed!” Saying it aloud made me all the more certain I was right. They looked at me, puzzled, not knowing what I meant. “Remember the runaway, Livie? The man you thought was Marcus?”

“That’s right!” Marcus said, slapping his hands together. “You tol’ me about him when I passed through in the winter.”

“There is a shed in the back lot of Twitch’s quarters,” I explained to Livie and James. “Next to his hounds.”

“Have mercy,” James muttered. “I always wondered why nobody but Willy Jack could wander back there.”

“The man got caught up in some brambles. When I helped untangle him, he told me he wanted to go home.”

“Not the words of a runaway,” Marcus stated, fully convinced. “Point me in the direction of this shed.”

James put his hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “I’ll take you.”

“No, James,” Livie said anxiously. “The mornin’ bell will ring soon, and if you ain’t tappin’ on your anvil, Marse and Willy Jack will have the plantation turned upside down. Then we all will be doomed.”

“Livie is right,” I declared, knowing what had to be done. “You must begin your day as usual, so as not to create any suspicion. I will take Marcus to the shed.”

Marcus hugged Livie tightly. “Once I know the slaves are there, I will figure out a plan. Don’t say nothin’ to nobody. Jes’ go about yo’ chores, but be ready to leave quicker than the wag of a dog’s tail.”

Nothing more was said. Livie embraced Marcus, then squeezed my hand as I walked by her. Words were not needed to convey what we were feeling. The night was thinning into the pale twilight of the coming day, so Marcus and I wasted no time in immersing into the greenery of the upper tobacco fields and running their rows lengthwise toward the back lot of West Gate. The maturing crop offered enough concealment for us to blend into the shadows.

We emerged from the tobacco and crossed a stretch of rocky parcel overgrown with weeds, a neglected barrier between the two plantations. On the other side, Marcus and I found ourselves overlooking the lot I had discovered the night I met the unknown runaway. I pointed to the shed outlined in the shadows below. Marcus motioned his intent to double back over the hill above us to gain access to the building from the other side. I followed closely, treading light of foot.

My stomach tightened as the smell of dung rose in the air and reminded me how near our steps were to the sleeping hounds. When we reached the backside of the shed, Marcus held up his hand, signaling me to be still. He crept around to the door, but the heavy padlock sealed it closed. I pressed

up against the shed where the shadows were darkest, in fear of being exposed to the loft above the carriage house that served as Twitch's home. It stood a short distance to my right, and towered above the back lot.

As I waited for Marcus, I rested the side of my face against the shed, terrified of what would happen should we be found out. The flesh across the nape of my neck prickled when I heard the low wheeze of breathing from inside the shed. I leveled my eye over a slight gap between the wooden slats. The moon was nearly gone, so only dim shards of light sliced within the interior of the shed, penetrating through the structure's imperfections. The moment my eyes adjusted to the illumination, a breath caught in my throat. Darkness muddied the details, but I could see the distinct outline of six men hunched on the dirt floor. All but one had their backs against the wall. Chains draped from their ankles and wrists; their mouths were stuffed with rags. Marcus came around the corner, and one look at my expression alerted him to my discovery. He pressed his face against a crack and then jerked back at the sight inside. He clenched his forehead with silent anguish, then bent forward and looked again, taking in the task at hand. Marcus dropped to his knees and dug his hands into the dirt. I fell in place alongside him. The soil was hard and rocky, leaving us no choice but to abandon our immediate attempt to reach the imprisoned men.

The carriage house loomed larger as the night sky thinned toward dawn. Marcus looked over at me, fraught with despair. My desire to comfort him was tempered by the instinct to ensure his safety before light came upon us. We were of one mind in knowing it was time to make our retreat. Marcus's hand was moist with dirt when he reached for mine, but his touch was sweet and gentle. We left as silently as we came and spoke no words until we ran clear of the upper fields, into the cover of trees.

"You better get on back to the big house befo' they find you gone," Marcus panted as we paused to catch our breath after the long sprint.

"No," I stated firmly. "We have to find a way to access those men back there. They are doomed as long as they are within reach of Twitch."

"That's my problem to figure out. A gal like you shouldn't mix in such things."

My converging emotions burst from me. "Why does everyone keep telling me what is right and proper for me? I am a grown woman who understands the complexities of my mind and body. No one should presume

to tell me what I should think or feel. I have no intention of running on home like a good little girl, pretending all is right with the world. Besides, Livie will cover for me so my absence does not create any danger for you or those poor men in the shed. Now, I know you will attempt to free them, and I believe I can provide valuable assistance. Let's stop wasting time and get on with it!"

Marcus's eyes sparkled with surprise and amusement at my outburst. But mostly, he looked at me with admiration and respect for my feelings. As Marcus mulled over my words, common sense told me he would turn me away, perhaps fearful to fully trust me. But instead he took my hand and led me deeper into the thicket. We made our way to the peak using a path I had never seen. Awakened by the day's first glimmer of sunshine, the mourning doves cooed from the treetops in the evergreen forest stretching toward the cave. We slipped inside its cool interior, our fingers still entwined, until Marcus released our connection to light a fire.

We sat opposite each other with flames crackling between us. Pine knots burned low and fragrant as shadows danced across the stone walls in every direction. Slowly, the damp air warmed. We relaxed and found ourselves staring at each other through the wisps of smoke that swirled in the air. Marcus removed his jacket and came around the fire to sit next to me.

"You cold?"

"No," I said with a nervous smile. "I feel quite flushed at the moment."

His molten eyes seeped into mine, but our joined purpose in helping the captives kept us focused on the greater cause. "We need to figure out a way to get in that shed," he said earnestly. "If Dead Eye works like most slave-stealin' mongrels, he'll beat and starve those men half-dead, then drag 'em back to dere plantation. Nobody gonna believe the rants of a captured runaway over the word of the white man returnin' Massa's property. Only makes the whuppin' worse."

"What you describe makes sense. Twitch comes and goes quite frequently."

"We gots'ta move quick. Ask James to meet me at sundown near the three boulders along the tree line. Have him bring hammers and chisels so we can break through them chains, and a shovel to dig our way inside. If he is willin' to help me, we can free them in the shadow of night and still have

a few hours in the dark to be on our way. Tell Livetta to wait in her cabin. We'll come fo' her if our plan works."

If our plan works. The possibility of failure, and the deathly consequences it would spawn, were too terrifying to linger over. The slim chance of them escaping would thrill me and break my heart, all at once. I filled with dread, thinking of the personal loss I would endure when left abandoned in their wake. Selfish thoughts, I admit, but true just the same. My throat tightened, choking my voice to a hoarse whisper.

"What shall I do when you all are gone?"

Sensing my anguish, Marcus shifted closer to me so we could face each other. "Remember us," he said with hushed tenderness. "Remember our cause. You renewed my belief that not all white hands are holding us down. Some are committed to reach out and help us rise from the ashes. You planted a healing seed inside us."

I was not aware of my tears until he touched each one where they fell on my cheek. He gently took my hand and laced our fingers together, then turned our hands upward in a familiar sign of promise. With the promise understood and the light of day creeping into our sanctuary, our fingers released and I bid him farewell.

Leaving Marcus hidden in the belly of the cave, I rushed down from the peak and through the fields toward Hillcrest. When the homestead was in sight, I slowed to a casual walk, playacting an early morning stroll for the benefit of any eyes taking notice.

"Where you been, girl?" Livie pounced as I walked into my bedchamber. "Esther Mae come near an hour ago to fetch you fo' breakfast. I tol' her, 'Miz Hannah walked off not a minute ago to get some air.' But you know Esther Mae; she jes' propped her hands on her hips and shook her head. She said, 'You gals better stop actin' so peculiar or you'll raise Miz 'Gusta's ire fo' sure.' "

I settled my hands on Livie's shoulders to calm her and let her know everything was all right. Like lifting a lid off a boiling pot, she huffed in steamy relief. As the muscles in her tense shoulders unwound, a bright grin took up the slack.

"Marcus came back fo' me," she said, opening her heart to revel in our secret. "My head has been spinnin' since I laid eyes on him. I ain't got no family left—all is either dead or scattered to the wind. Then the brother I

feared lost comes walkin' back into my arms. Jes' seein' his face churns up all the love I buried with the memories of days gone by. They is reborn inside me. Marcus and me loved the same people and cried the same tears. Now we is gonna walk the same walk."

I clasped Livie's hands with understanding, but knew I could allow her only a brief period of joy. Time was our enemy, marching by with little regard to Livie's elation.

"When I came up from the quarters this mornin' and seen nary a sign of you, I thought fo' sure somethin' bad happened."

"Marcus and I went to the cave to formulate a plan. We must take action quickly."

"Was the rustled slaves in the shed like Marcus was a-thinkin'?"

"Yes, they are horribly beaten and shackled. Marcus intends to free them tonight. He wants James to bring a hammer, chisel, and shovels from the blacksmith shop and meet him near Castle Rock after nightfall."

Livie shook her head. "James ain't here, Hannah. Marse Twitch took him to town this mornin' to shore up the bridge fo' crossin'. Marse says he is gonna be ridin' out the day after tomorr'y on slave business, and wants to use the road headin' south. The only way to get there is by crossin' the river. Marse don't trust no other to do the bridge repair right and proper, so he took James in town till tomorr'y, makin' fo' sure his wagon can pass over safely."

"Oh no," I said. "Marcus needs those tools tonight. His instincts were right in thinking Twitch would be quick to be rid of the abducted slaves one way or the other. From what you say about Twitch leaving, we will barely get them out in time." I thought for a moment, then touched her arm gently. "Can you smuggle the tools from the blacksmith shop?"

"I think so," she pondered. "I been down there enough to see where James keeps most everything. And since I'm a common sight near the forge, nobody will wonder why I'm roundabout."

"Do you know what a chisel looks like?"

Livie smiled and shook her head teasingly. "Every soul outside the big house knows what a chisel is. I will take the tools to Marcus and tell him about James."

"Marcus will need help in getting the captives out of there undetected before morning. I will take the tools to him. You are round with child and in

no condition to traipse around Twitch's back lot. It is far too dangerous. I will be able to move quicker and with familiarity." I paused, not wanting to complete my thought, but knew all must be said. "If anything goes wrong, I will not face the same consequence as you."

"And Marcus?"

"Marcus is committed to doing everything in his power to aid those wanting a run at freedom. He knows the risk, and will invade the shed with or without my assistance. His chance of success increases with me there helping him."

Livie nodded. "Let me do my part, then. I'll run on down to the shop and fetch them tools."

After Livie was on her way, I washed my hands and changed my dress. Then I made certain to cross paths with Aunt Augusta. When she asked about my whereabouts, I remained matter-of-fact.

"I have been enjoyin' the pleasant weather. The heat can be stifling in the house, so when the twinge of a headache came on me, I decided that a walk in the fresh air would ease my discomfort."

"Your activity seems to agree with you. Your spirits and hue are piqued to a level that becomes you."

"I believe you are right, Aunt Augusta." I smiled wholeheartedly. "My activity has brought me renewed life."

As I left Aunt Augusta in the parlor, I could not help being amused at her observations. Unbeknownst to her, what she saw in me was the reflection of my true self, confident in my strength and conviction. How I wished I could remain bathed in this feeling. However, the hours in the day continued draining away, bringing closer the moment when my purpose would be realized, and with it, my heart torn in two.

Chapter 28

Hidden in the evening shadows behind the carriage house, I grew concerned about the delay in Livie's return and feared our activities had been found out. As I nestled in the cover of darkness, I watched Winston wearily brush down the horses, patting them along the neck and whispering day-ending farewells with instructions to rest up until his return at sunrise. He hoisted his lantern and secured the doors of the stable. The night deepened around me as he headed off to Mud Run, surrounded by a halo of illumination. Anxious solitude tensed my limbs, and all I could do was wait.

The night was cool, silencing the song of the crickets and tree frogs. The only sounds drifted up from the distant quarters and from the rustle of an occasional swirl of wind. Suddenly, a cold hand took hold of my arm. "What you doin' here?"

Triggered by fright, my arms struck out into the purple shadows at an unseen target. I eased when I recognized Livie's hushed voice. "Settle yo'self, girl. Willy Jack is on the prowl tonight." Her face was now inches from mine and angled toward the night, measuring each shift of the breeze. Satisfied we were alone, she continued. "Wasn't I s'posed to meet you in yo' bedchamber?"

"I thought it best to slip out while Aunt Augusta was busy in the pantry, checking supplies with Esther Mae. She will retire to her room when she is finished, and will assume I have done the same. I have been waiting here to intercept you on your way to the house."

Livie knelt on the ground and unfolded a cloth bundle she had tied in her apron. "I had hoped James would ride in late with Marse, so I hid down yonder a bit. If the bridge work got done early, they might have showed up tonight. Guess Willy Jack was thinkin' the same as me, 'cuz he was draggin' his feet around there too. He probably knowed he be whupped if he wasn't waitin' fo' Marse when the wagon rolled in. I stayed still and outta sight till Willy Jack moved on, but my skin is prickled knowin' he is sniffin' around."

"Did you have any trouble getting the tools?"

“There were no shovels or hammers to be found,” Livie said, placing several tools in front of me. “James must have them in town. Here are the chisels Marcus wanted. I picked up two fist-sized rocks to use like hammers, and I found a couple o’ broken hoe blades he could use fo’ diggin’.”

“Good idea, Liv.” I gathered the tools and wrapped them in my champagne shawl. With great reticence, I set the bundle aside and faced Livie. “Marcus said you should be prepared to leave at a moment’s notice. If all goes as planned, you will be on your way before daybreak.” I was drawn to embrace her, but she wavered back a step.

“Don’t be sayin’ good-bye yet. That be like namin’ a chile befo’ it’s born. Jes’ might put a wrongful hex on you and Marcus over at the back lot. Besides, I ain’t goin’ nowhere without James.”

Livie’s declaration startled me. A few months ago, I would have selfishly agreed, knowing if she remained with James, it would anchor Livie by my side, perhaps forever. But now the vision and strength I had garnered since Livie came into my life allowed me a better perspective. I recognized what was right and best for my dear friend. Loving her meant letting her go. I vowed to watch her leave with a smile on my face. It would be my lasting gift to her, and perhaps lighten her load ever so slightly.

It was not likely that Twitch would return with James after nightfall. I suspected Twitch was already three shots of rye into a drunken evening at the saloon in town. His desire for one last night of revelry before returning to smuggle away his bounty would work to our advantage. The timing was perfect for freeing his captives. They could start a few hours ahead of him and put as much distance as possible between them and his hounds.

I must convince Livie to be ready to run.

“Livie,” I said, steadying my hand on her shoulder, “James would want you to take this opportunity. You may never get the chance again, at least not with someone as experienced and close to you as Marcus.”

Livie’s eyes plunged into mine, making it clear she understood the magnitude of her decision. Then with a determined lift of her shoulder, she nudged my hand away to detach from any encouragement or reasoning I offered.

“I will *not* leave him behind. I love that man. James gave me a life outside o’ the big house. Don’t mean no hurt with them words, Hannah,

’cuz you been as good as gold to me. But inside the walls of our cabin, our thinkin’ and feelin’ is all our own. James and me dreamed about the day we would walk free in the land o’ milk and honey, and I ain’t gonna walk there without him. His heart was broke once already when his first wife and chile was sold away from him. Even if James hisself tol’ me to go, I wouldn’t leave him here with nothin’. I want him to hold our chile when it’s born. You would understand if you ever felt love down deep fo’ a man. No sacrifice or risk would be too mighty when you feel love so strong. Now, don’t try to tell me no different, ’cuz I ain’t changin’ my mind.”

I reached out and slid my hands around Livie’s where they were planted stubbornly on her hips. I eased her to me, not only to close the distance, but so she could see I was standing by her decision no matter what road she chose to follow. More than anything, I wanted her to know I understood that feelings for a man could defy logic and reason.

“Livie, do you believe there can be more than one man who can set your insides awhirl like that?” My question was meant to sort out my own confusion, but Livie misunderstood.

“There is no other man for me, so don’t think I can toss him away like bathwater.”

“Not you, Liv,” I continued in a confidential hush. “I was talking about me.”

“What’chu sayin’, girl?” The starless night could not mask Livie’s dumbfounded gaze. “Now, don’t you give up on Mista Colt. He is gonna come back. Besides, there ain’t a man round here better suited for you. You and him think alike, move alike, and even act alike when it comes to doin’ what’s right fo’ folks around you.”

I bit my lip before saying the next words aloud. “I have always carried love and devotion for Colt deep in my heart. But I also find myself warmed by my periodic interludes with Marcus . . . working together, growing in admiration for his cause.”

A distraught gasp escaped her as she shook me by the shoulders. “Is you crazy, girl? You gots’ta put such a notion outta yo’ head. Don’t never say such a thing again. Don’t even think it! They would tie Marcus to a wagon and drag his dead body across the county, and I don’t mean secured by his arms and legs! It’s a death wish fo’ both of you.”

“I know, Liv,” I said, trembling. “I don’t want to bring harm on anyone. Why am I awash with such feelings, yet continue to pine for Colt’s return? What a horrible and disloyal woman I’ve become!”

Livie pulled me into her arms. “You are not horrible or disloyal. But you *are* a woman, and new to the feelings that come with the parts o’ you that are bloomin’ like springtime daffodils. All flowers stretch and grow as they unfold. The petals reach fo’ the sun one day and then fo’ rain the next. It all depends on what is sprinklin’ down over them. Folks ain’t much different.”

My shame unwound slightly as I eased back and saw Livie release a broad smile of assurance. I recognized something of me in Livie’s words as she continued.

“Don’t confuse admiration with love, Hannah. Marcus is an amazin’ man. I been in awe of him fo’ as long as I can remember. You don’t know much about his life, nor he of yours. You is attracted to courage and cause, not to a man you barely know. His touch speaks to the woman in you. Folks in the quarters is different ’cuz we ain’t bound up in fineries and formal etiquette in how we speak and interact. Once you crossed the boundary into our world, you were exposed to closeness of both body and emotion that you haven’t had the chance to experience with Colt yet. The warm tug inside you is no different from a daffodil drawn to the sun. It’s lettin’ you know that the woman in you is ripe and ready to be picked by the right man.”

From out of nowhere, the shuffle of boots in the yard froze Livie and me in the darkness. “Who’s that thar?” the man’s voice challenged. “Who be wanderin’ out o’ the quarters this time o’ night?”

Neither one of us breathed. My mind began spinning possible reasons to claim why Livie and I were crouched in the shadows with chisels and blades bundled in my fine shawl. No explanation would be without suspicion, yet pieces of desperate reasoning began falling into place in my mind. The voice demanded attention.

“Show yo’self, whoever you be.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but another voice popped from across the yard.

“It jes’ be me, ol’ Winston. What you doin’ prowlin’ around over here, Willy Jack?”

“Don’t need to answer to you, ol’ man,” Willy Jack growled as he strode through the moonlight toward Winston. “I’s the one askin’ the questions.”

The sight of a black man loosening a whip from his belt to confront another black man shook me. If Winston was afraid, he did not show it. Wisdom of years had Winston cajoling him with a grin of obedience.

“Don’t want no trouble, Willy Jack,” Winston said, raising a hand of surrender. “Jes’ fetchin’ my hat. I set it over yonder on the fence post earlier, then walked off without it.”

“Was you down by the blacksmith shop?”

“No, sah,” Winston said, puzzled. “Finished here a short time ago. Got halfway home and remembered my hat.”

Livie squeezed my arm as Willy Jack twisted the whip in his hand as he faced Winston. “Thought I heard footsteps down by the forge, then again up this way.”

“Probably a restless possum pokin’ about. Saw one a minute ago crawlin’ up under the wood pile over yonder.”

Willy Jack glanced over at the wood pile stacked to the left of where Livie and I were huddled in each other’s arms. Winston walked over to where his hat sat perched on the post while Willy Jack peered our way. Winston waved his hat at Willy Jack to show him he was true to his word. The gesture drew Willy Jack’s eyes from our direction. Winston paused before heading down the hill to the quarters.

“Esther Mae’s got some grits and gravy waitin’ fo me. There’s enough fo’ one more, if it suits you.”

Willy Jack’s guarded posture relaxed with surprise. His hand jiggled awkwardly, as though his dangling whip was now an unwanted appendage. He cranked his wrist behind him until the whip was reeled into a tight loop and tucked back onto his belt. Willy Jack looked like a little boy in the outline of Winston’s gentle shadow. Winston waited patiently for Willy Jack to find a way to accept without seeming desperate.

“Warm grits would sure taste better than cold ashcake.”

“Let’s get a move on, befo’ Esther Mae gets riled up waitin’ fo’ me.” Before turning to follow Willy Jack, Winston glanced our way and pressed his hat firmly on his head. His expression hinted that he knew there was more in the shadows than a wayward night critter. When the two men trudged beyond earshot, Livie puffed her cheeks in relief.

“Thought we was found out fo’ sure.”

My thumping heart echoed her panic. More than ever, I understood the danger in what we were doing. One careless decision or unguarded moment could result in tragedy, and all we hoped to gain would be torn from our grasp. Until now, no one paid much attention to the relationship Livie and I had developed, and therefore could not gauge how deep and encompassing it was. But if anyone discovered how far over the boundary we had stepped, we would face dire reproach.

“I must hurry to meet Marcus,” I said. “Stay in the quarters and be seen so you will not be connected to tonight’s events. If James returns, wait for Marcus at Castle Rock.”

“Seems a visit to Winston and Esther Mae would be a good way to pass the evenin’,” she said with a sly grin.

“What a great idea, Liv. If you sit under Willy Jack’s nose, you will be the last person they will look for when the captives go missing. And with so few people aware that Twitch is pirating slaves, he cannot launch an extensive inquisition.”

Although firm in her decision not to flee without James, Livie’s choice did not come without anguish. I touched her cheek as her eyes welled with tears. The joy of reuniting with her brother would be short-lived. By night’s end, he would vanish again, with no guarantee of returning. My heart was as pained as hers.

“Be careful, my friend,” Livie choked as she untied an indigo ribbon from her hair. She kissed it gently, then pressed it into my hand. “Give this piece o’ me to Marcus fo’ luck. Then he will always have a remembrance of me, even if we never lay eyes on each other again.”

Hugging Livie tight, I whispered in her ear, “Tonight we must remain strong, and never give up hope or belief in the promise of possibility. Your journey does not end because of one lost opportunity.”

Livie was bolstered by my words. Her strength and resolve reappeared, along with her coping sense of humor. She lifted her eyebrow. “Don’t you got somewhere else to be?”

The gravity of the moment would not allow us a smile, so we reached out a hand in acknowledgment and admiration. “I must go now,” I whispered.

She nodded. “And I must stay. Tell him to carry his sister’s love wherever he goes.”

With my bundled shawl pressed against my bosom to prevent the bouncing tools from giving away my footsteps, I wove a path through the tobacco rows, being careful not to break any plants along the way. Moonbeams outlined the boulder where Marcus awaited me, his anxious figure pacing in the shadows.

“Thought somethin’ happened, girl,” he said, pulling me behind the rock. “Where is James?”

“Twitch took him off the plantation to do some work in town. The shovels and hammers are with James, but I have chisels, some rocks, and hoe blades.” I tore my shawl in half and wrapped the pieces around each chisel. “It will muffle the sound of rock hitting iron.”

“Clever girl,” Marcus said, looking over the tools with a satisfied nod. He shoved the bundle in his satchel. “Times a- wastin’. I better get . . .”

I cut off his words before he could say good-bye. “I am going with you to West Gate.”

“Is you crazy, girl? It’s too dangerous.” Marcus touched my cheek with gratitude. “I love your gumption, but from here on, I go it alone.”

“Gumption has nothing to do with it, Marcus. I am being practical. With two of us chiseling those chains, they will be free in half the time it would take you working alone.” As he considered what I was saying, I stressed my point further. “The sooner they are released, the colder your trail will be by morning.”

Marcus rubbed the back of his neck, cocking his head to determine my resolve with his intense eyes. Finally, his resistant posturing relaxed. “Guess there’s no arguin’ with common sense.”

We wasted no more time debating my involvement. With a tight grip on my arm, Marcus kept me running at his side as we followed the line of the field toward the back lot of West Gate. I stumbled when the moon disappeared behind the thickening clouds, erasing all detail around me. We stopped to catch our breath and reorient in the blackness. Marcus pointed toward the lit windows of Uncle Mooney’s manor, which created a beacon across the acreage to our left.

“If we keep the big house down on this side of us and move toward the firelight of them slave quarters up on the hillside, we will run right into the belly of the hound yard. We’ll go up around the back ridge like we done the last time, and come up on the shed from the far side. That will keep us out

o’ sight o’ the dogs. With Dead Eye in town, we can dig our way into the shed without bein’ seen from his window.”

I nodded, and we started off again. I was amazed at the ease with which Marcus slipped through the night. The rocks and trees were like trusted accomplices hustling him from one stretch of hidden path to the next. As we pushed our way through a heavy thicket, we emerged into a clearing where the hillside quarters of West Gate rose up over the next knoll. The orange specks of firelit cabins flowed downward like a batch of stars fallen to the earth. The spot marked where we turned south and entered the back lot through a stretch of bare ground between the shed and the carriage house left lifeless in Twitch’s absence.

My heart throbbed under the weight of the perilous vulnerability we carried on our backs. The shed stood dark and silent, the hidden moon beckoning us to hurry. Crouched on our knees, Marcus removed the tools from his satchel and laid them out on the ground. He handed me one of the flat blades and motioned me to mimic his methods. Pushing the sharp end of his hoe between the ground and the baseboard of the shed, he used slow strokes to pull the loosened soil back in a pile between us. I joined in, digging as slowly as he, so our movements could blend amid the unremarkable night sounds around us. We had not gotten far before the subtle shift of chains jangled from inside the shed.

“Lay quiet,” Marcus whispered through the growing hole. “We gonna get you out.” Marcus’s words stirred the chains alive with activity until a husky voice inside shushed them to stillness. The voice whispered from within.

“Who is you?”

“A friend,” Marcus whispered back. The power and importance of what he was doing struck me with awesome clarity. I dug faster, and as we hunched over the ditch, I could feel Marcus’s eyes on me. Without stopping, I let my eyes lift to his and was caressed by the certainty of his belief in me.

When the hole beneath the baseboard was large enough, Marcus flattened on his back and shimmied inside. My awkward attempt to follow him was hindered when the flounce across the waist of my dress caught on the splintered wood. His strong arm appeared through the darkness, hooking around my shoulder and pulling me the rest of the way. Marcus did not realize my dress was snagged, and when the flounce tore loose, the whimper of an awakened hound halted the breath of every soul huddled in

the shed. We stood silent as a graveyard. Terror pulsated through my veins and heightened my senses enough to trace the dog's movement without seeing it. He paced a few steps along the chicken-wire pen. His whimper was not threatening as much as it was confused at being pulled from deep slumber. Heavy panting marked his position as he walked the length of the pen and back. Satisfied the night held nothing worthy of his attention, the hound flopped down, and soon his breathing settled back into the steady rhythm of sleep.

By this time, my eyes had adjusted to the pitch-blackness of the shed. Marcus stood next to me with his hand on my waist, reassuring me with his presence. The six other figures around us were positioned like statues. One stood in the near corner. Three others crouched at intervals along the far wall. The two remaining men were lying on their sides across the dirt floor to my right. The stench of feces, vomit, and rotting flesh made my stomach wrench. Marcus moved from man to man, pulling the rags from their mouths, all the while signaling them not to speak. His movement disrupted a swarm of blowflies, unleashing them in a buzzing swirl against my face. As I brushed the plump insects from my mouth and ears, there was no point in wasting time being appalled by the conditions of the secret prison. Releasing the men from their torture was our only focus.

Marcus gave me a chisel and turned me toward a bearded man standing in the corner to my left. His feet were chained together and his wrists shackled to a heavy chain attached to the wall. Marcus led my hands to the first iron link connecting the man's wrist shackle to the chain. He guided my hand until the chisel tip was in place against the link. I feared the tapping rock would arouse the dogs, but by using my halved shawl to absorb the sound, we remained undetected. The imprisoned slave wound the slackened length of the chain around his arm, demonstrating his expertise at silencing shackles for the sake of secrecy.

With senses keen like a creature of the night, I worked feverishly to break through the death link poised as my enemy. I had no way to measure the passing time, but the process seemed unending, until I heard the iron snap of chain letting go a few feet away. Marcus had freed the chained wrist of one man, and without celebration began knocking at the shackle on the opposite wrist. The clatter of iron links dropping away brought a flurry of activity from the captives. All but one stood or sat upright, perhaps

convinced their chance for escape was now possible. I continued the assault with my chisel until I felt the grip of the link weakening. When the wrist shackle snapped free of the chain, I was so shocked, an exalted yelp sprang from me. I looked up at the once-solemn man who now flexed his unencumbered hand excitedly in front of his face. He no longer had questions in his eyes when he looked at me, but reached out to join me in my effort. I gave him a hoe blade so he could go to work on his other hand. Kneeling at his feet, I tapped at the link closest to the shackle on his ankle. Through the shadows, I felt his eyes on me. I paused long enough to give a soft smile of quiet encouragement. It was hard to be sure, but he appeared to nod in acknowledgment of my heartfelt message.

As more limbs were freed, we gained momentum and rushed toward completion. I crawled toward the man curled on the floor, and when I reached for his wrist, I was chilled by damp, leathery skin, taut and lifeless within my perspiring hand. I drew back with a gasp. Marcus caught and steadied me as I toppled backward. The bearded man I had freed spoke his first words.

“He passed to de other side this mornin’.”

I wiped my hands down the front of my dress, but the cool touch of death remained on my fingertips. Marcus helped me to my feet, pausing briefly over the man. “He is mo’ free of his chains than we is, bless his soul.”

“He is my brother, William,” the man said with tight emotion. He knelt and pulled the corpse into his arms for a farewell embrace. A warm line of tears ran down my cheeks as he rocked and told us William had a wife and three young daughters who would be heartbroken by their father’s disappearance. He vowed he would return to them so they would know William did not desert them. “William, yo’ good heart beats in me now, and I will care fo’ dem likes dey was my own.”

Marcus paused long enough to show respect, then laid a hand on the grieving man’s shoulder. “Loyal brother, William will surely thank you in the by-and-by, but if you want to carry out yo’ promise, we gots’ta get movin’. Sunup is comin’ soon, and we best have a good start befo’ them hounds is sent to hunt us down.”

We all slithered through the hole we had dug earlier and turned to follow Marcus, but within two short steps, a rough, clammy hand latched onto my wrist. Terror burned through me when the ghostly eyes and drooping mouth

of Uncle Mooney's crippled slave woman stared at me through the darkness. Panicked, I tried yanking free of her tight grip, but her lowly moan slowed my struggle. She lifted her bent claw, which was draped in the flounce I had snagged on the shed. She poked it in my direction until I took it from her twisted hand.

Shaken, Marcus stepped beside me. "If we had left proof o' you behind . . ."

He did not have to finish the thought for horror to fill me. The old woman stepped from the shadows to save my life. "Thank you, kind woman," I said, welcoming her hand in mine. I tugged her toward me. "Come with us."

She pulled back and groaned. Holding up her claw, she shook her head as though showing me she was not equipped for the journey. Then poking her hand toward the hillside, she moaned her insistence that we leave. To emphasize the path she had chosen, the crippled woman turned and limped away into the night.

The wheezing breaths of the dogs waned behind us as Marcus pulled us on our way. He picked up the pace so the stiffened joints of the slaves could loosen into a labored trot. Marcus stopped when we reached Castle Rock, marking the path to the peak. The desperate pack of fugitives clung to one another for support. Marcus pointed them forward.

"Follow the path to where it crosses a stream, and wait fo' me there. I will be right along."

The men complied and hobbled off. Marcus scanned the shadows around us. "Where's Livetta? She was s'posed to meet me here. Maybe she got spooked and went on up to the cave."

"No," I said, bracing my hand on Marcus's chest. "Livie's not coming."

His chest rose and fell beneath my hand as my words settled in his mind. He grabbed my arms above the elbows and shook me. "She gots'ta come now, Hannah! Comin' back ain't gonna be possible once Dead Eye knows he's been found out. He ain't gonna know who or how, but he's gonna realize runaways or sympathizers is underfoot. The path through these hills is gonna disappear when I leave tonight. It's the only way to keep the movement safe and alive."

His emotional plea gave me a glimpse at how deeply committed this courageous shepherd was, but I also knew Livie's commitment to James

was as strong and as deep. I removed Livie's indigo hair ribbon from my pocket and tied it around Marcus's wrist. "Livie will not leave without James. I cannot convince her otherwise. She asked me to give you this remembrance of her."

"Then I gots'ta go without her," he said, gently pressing his warm hand to my cheek. "We will always be bound by our actions. Trust gots'ta begin somewhere, and I'm glad it took hold between us. If our paths ever cross again, you got a friend in me."

"And you have a friend in me as well," I said. My eyes closed as he touched his lips to my forehead. "Allow me one last action to seal the bond between us." I looped my hand under the canary yellow cloth tied around his neck. Rather than let the pain of good-bye peel open my heart, I unraveled his kerchief and tied it around my ankle, so its length dragged on the ground. Honoring the promise that bridged us, I darted through the graying mist to lay a scented path toward the river. When I reached the far edge of the field, I looked back, and Marcus was gone.

Chapter 29

"Grab him and take him to the whipping post!" Twitch barked as he kicked open Livie's cabin door. Willy Jack scrambled in and wrestled James to the floor, toppling chairs and an unlit lamp across the room. James used his powerful arms to toss them off, but Willy Jack grabbed the iron poker from the hearth and countered with a blow to the side of James's head. As he crumpled, Livie cried out at the sight of blood flowing from the gash in James' scalp. Twitch pulled Livie away from James and shoved her toward me where I stood, shocked and defenseless in the corner of the room.

"Have you gone mad, Twitch?" I said, shielding Livie from his fury. "You have no authority to strike out within our quarters. Leave at once."

"Not until you tell me what you are doin' here among the chattel."

I delivered the most believable lie I could think of. "Livie is nearing her time for birth, so Aunt Augusta sent me to check on her. I was unaware James had returned home."

Twitch scrutinized my words and expression. I had no doubt why he was here. His bounty was gone, and someone would be held accountable. We barely had time to tell James what had transpired in his absence when they burst into the cabin. Willy Jack's swollen and bloodied face told me he had been the first to pay for Twitch's secret loss. Apparently, James would be the second. Left dazed and unable to resist, James was quickly shackled, despite our protest.

"There was an accident with some . . . livestock while I was away, and Willy Jack pointed out James's shoddy work was likely responsible. Fact is, I think it was purposeful. I may not have the right to lay a whip to any of your Runians without Augusta's permission, but James is still the property of Mooney Reynolds, which means his hide belongs to me!"

I could do little but hold on to Livie as they dragged James away. I had to intervene in some way, but knew there would be no support from Aunt Augusta or Uncle Mooney. If I could get word to Colt, perhaps he could return home and mediate on James's behalf. After all, he still had some influence on West Gate's activities. I assured Livie I would find a way to

help James. Aunt Augusta was puzzled by my request to have Winston drive me to town. She initially balked at my request, but I was not deterred so easily.

“I am not a child begging for a pony ride,” I stated with my arms folded and poised for an argument. “You keep saying I should mingle more often with the girls of our social circle, but how can it be so if I spend all my time up here on the mountain?”

“Very well, Hannalore,” she said without resistance. “I will instruct Winston to be at your disposal for the day.”

By midmorning, we were on our way. Winston drove the carriage with more snap of the rein than was his custom. Rather than ask him to slow the horses, I clutched the bench seat to keep from bouncing from my cushion. Unfortunately, the wooden seat top was hinged to allow for storage beneath it, so it slammed open and shut, tossing me like a bronco buster in a rodeo.

“ ’Scuse the rough ride, Miz Hannah,” Winston called as the carriage slowed. “But I figured you is in a hurry.”

We reached the bend where the county road continued south and the town road forked to the left. My plan was to nonchalantly direct Winston toward a brief interlude in Lows Hollow under the guise of surprising Colt with an unexpected visit. Colt had yet to return to West Gate since learning Twitch was his half brother. He had buried himself in medicine while taking residence with Dr. Waverly in Lows Hollow. Uncle Mooney made one trip to try to cajole Colt to return, but offered no explanation or apology for the deception. Father and son had not spoken since. In all the commotion, I had not made clear my destination to Winston. So I was aghast when the carriage squealed to a halt and Winston came down to speak with me through the window.

“I’ll continue on down de county road toward Lows Hollow if dat is what pleases you, miz.”

“Winston, how did you know my plan was to get to Colt?” He smiled his *we’ve got a secret* smile, which I reflected back in appreciation.

“Jes’ keepin’ my ear to de ground, miz.” Without further explanation, he climbed back into the driver’s seat and coaxed the horses back to a full gallop. I was deeply relieved at not having to weave untruths to explain my unexplainable actions. Now I could concentrate on the greater challenge of

convincing Colt to involve himself in matters he had repeatedly warned me to stay clear of.

Dr. Waverly maintained a small office from within his home near the town center of Lows Hollow. A shingle bearing his name hung from the pillar of an abundant porch shading three freshly whitewashed rocking chairs. Colt bounded out of the door toward us, the sound of our carriage announcing our arrival.

“Hannah!” He grinned. “What a pleasant surprise. I was just sealing a letter to you.”

I desperately tried to greet Colt with the same enthusiasm, but he instantly recognized the distress on my face. His smile turned to concern once he sensed it was not a social visit bringing me to him. Winston did not dismount, as was his practice when Colt addressed him with a warm hello.

“You sho’ is a welcome sight, Mista Colt,” Winston said, lifting his hat. “But if we is gonna get back befo’ nightfall, I best water de hosses, and turn de wheels back de way we came.”

“I shall explain on the way,” I said to Colt as he looked at me to answer the questions dancing in his eyes. “James’s life is in danger, and I fear Twitch will kill him if you do not intervene. He is being severely punished because of activity for which I bear responsibility. I pray it’s not too late.”

At the mention of Twitch’s name, Colt darted up the cobblestones to the house. He was gone but a minute, then returned with his medical bag and a hastily stuffed satchel of clothing clutched beneath his arm. As we set off on the road home, I spoke openly and honestly about what had transpired. I did not want to gain Colt’s assistance under false pretences or half-truths. I told him of Marcus’s return and of our discovery of abducted slaves imprisoned in the back lot of West Gate. I revealed the plan Marcus confided in me and how I assisted him in their escape.

“Thieving bastard,” Colt muttered, his eyes ablaze with outrage. “Twitch is a snake among snakes. It sheds light on how his slave catching is so profitable within the small timeframe he devotes to it. He steals the slaves of others and holds them in the shed until they are posted with fat rewards.”

“And if there is no reward,” I said, completing the picture, “they die or are sold. Either outcome means they are never heard from again.”

Colt raked his fingers through his hair to straighten the thoughts jumbled in his mind. “I have no doubt my father knows of Twitch’s sordid little side

business. In fact, he most likely is profiting from it, even if he's receiving only a small percentage based on supporting Twitch in silence."

I wished I could have objected, if for no other reason than to comfort Colt. However, I too believed Uncle Mooney's involvement was absolute. My wondering went a step further.

"Do you think Aunt Augusta is involved as well?"

"My concern is, why are *you* involved?" Colt's question was delivered through rock-hard eyes. "You have crossed a dangerous line. One I repeatedly cautioned you not to breach. You must detach yourself now, and without delay."

I reached for his hand. "Please don't be angry with me. I heeded your warning—honestly, I did. However, a call to action came from within me. I am not acting on foolish impulse. I have grown in confidence and conviction, trusting what my heart tells me even when the stakes are high and at odds with standard tradition."

"You are a bright and sensible woman," Colt said, turning away as if he were more comfortable speaking to the passing countryside. "So I shall not scold you like a child. Besides, there is no admonishment I can give you that has not crossed your mind at some point. It makes me wonder, though." Colt paused uncomfortably. "Why are you risking your life and reputation? Who has awakened this fire of enlightenment in you?"

"Livie's friendship has changed me. It has given me a glimpse into the life of our Runians and others like them. I am ashamed of what I see. Men and women treated as less than human. I have spent time among them, am acquainted with them now as people, and I cannot stand by, indifferent to their abuse."

Colt's silence chilled me. My nonconforming beliefs fully exposed and held in judgment, I chose not to reveal myself any further. Was Colt a friend or an adversary? Perhaps I had crossed the line in his eyes too?

"Livetta has been with you for more than a year," he said slowly, "without incident or threat of running off." He finally turned to face me, his glistening eyes taking me by surprise. "You are doing it for *him*, aren't you?"

I hesitated, not wanting to cause him any unnecessary pain. My actions may have concerned Colt, but it was my motivation that had shaken him. I rejoiced within, relieved I had not lost my trusted ally. Years of closeness

made me easy to read, so I could not deny the undercurrent he sensed swirling in me.

“Him?” My attempt at innocence was unconvincing.

“When we first helped Marcus, I saw a glint of tender admiration in your gaze as he spoke of his quest for freedom,” Colt said with a wounded smile. “Even I was impressed with his raw devotion to Livetta and his commitment to see the others onward. I was relieved when he left, and convinced myself afterward it was the dance of firelight against the cave walls that filled your eyes with enthrallment.”

“I apologize for being distracted lately,” I said with honest assertion. “But it is not what you think.”

“Now he has returned, and there are no cave walls to explain the twinkle in your eyes. Oh, how I envy him having that power over you.”

With greater issues at hand, I prickled with frustration at his boyish jealousy. “I will not deny taking a great risk for Marcus, but I am also doing it for Livetta and James. And for some others passing near enough for me to offer merciful assistance. I will not harbor guilt for doing what my heart tells me, because there is no shame in finding a worthwhile purpose.”

Colt gripped my shoulders with passionate exasperation. “Do you think I don’t understand matters of the heart?”

“ ’Scuse me, Miz Hannah,” Winston called down from his perch. “We is comin’ up on de plantation road. Should I leave you off at de big house befo’ takin’ Mista Colt over yonder to Massa Reynolds place?”

“No, Winston,” I stammered as Colt released me and turned away. “We must press on to West Gate. Please, hurry!”

The two plantations loomed at opposite ends of the ridge above us. Swallowed in the shadows cast by a disappearing sun, the properties stood like fortresses braced for an expected assault. As dusk surrendered to night, Winston bypassed the entrance to Hillcrest and turned the horses toward the west. I saw no sign of Aunt Augusta in the yard or watching from any window of the house. I released an anxious breath. If she was unaware of our return, there would be one less obstacle keeping us from James.

Under Colt’s instruction, Winston halted the horses at the front entrance of West Gate’s carriage house, its frame masking the secrets hidden behind in the back lot. There was no activity other than the movement of lanterns along the foothills, where a handful of slaves moved among the pigsties,

wearily slopping the hogs. Colt helped me from the carriage, and I quickly led him around the building to the back lot. Across the dirt yard, the shed door stood open and illuminated by a lantern hanging from a bent nail plunged in its center. We hurried toward the shed; the low gurgle and moans from within quickened our pace.

The hounds went berserk at the sight of us. I broke into a sprint toward the light. Colt's long stride kept him two paces in front of me. The halo of lantern light enveloped us as we rushed toward the shed. I screamed when our steps were cut short by Twitch as he burst through the open door to confront us. He clenched the barrel of a rifle in one hand and a bullwhip in the other.

"Well, looky here," he said, snarling through his twisted whiskers. "The prodigal son has returned. Did your little tart lead you back by the nose?"

"Let me in there," Colt growled as he pushed to get by him. Twitch was not giving any ground, so when they erupted into a tussle, the penned dogs ignited into a frenzy that could barely be contained by the gnarled wire of the pen. Twitch used the length of his shotgun to shove Colt back against me. Holding the weapon squarely against Colt's chest, Twitch spat a vicious warning.

"What goes on back here is my business. Now get on outta here before one o' them dogs gets out and rips you apart."

Twitch shifted just enough for me to see James hanging limply from a beam in the back corner of the shed, strung up by his arms. The skin on his back was sliced open with rows of fresh wounds, each oozing blood down the length of him. Thick, red blood puddled in the dirt beneath his dangling feet. Willy Jack rubbed salt brine into the sores, raising agonizing cries from James's tortured body. The beating must have been inflicted on and off all day, because Willy Jack did not look much better than James, and appeared near collapse.

"Cut him down at once and let me tend to his wounds," Colt demanded.

"I could blow a hole through you, front to back, Purebred, and not lose one wink of sleep. So you better turn tail and get on back to your own business."

"Stop, Twitch, I beg you." I had little hope of reasoning with him, but I refused to remain silent. "Nothing will be gained if you beat him to death."

“I told you this mornin’ to say out of it, girl. Anyways, it’s your fault, the way I see it. Never had no trouble with James till he married up with your uppity wench. Can’t trust none of ’em.”

I grabbed a shovel and lifted it over my shoulder. “Unless you plan to shoot both of us, I demand you lower your gun and release James.”

“What’s going on here!” a voice bellowed from behind me. Twitch’s dead eye flinched and he immediately lowered his gun. Uncle Mooney stormed up and yanked the rifle from his bastard son’s hand. “Have you lost your mind, boy? Raising arms against your own blood?”

“I want this slave released, Father,” Colt said, pointing toward James. “Twitch refuses to abide by my command.”

“That’s what brought you back? An insignificant slave matter? I thought perhaps you had come to your senses and returned to take your rightful place among us.”

“Purebred here thinks his word holds more power than mine.”

Uncle Mooney grabbed Twitch by the collar. “Do not disrespect a son in his father’s eyes. I warned you not to use that term when referring to Colton.”

“Colt riled me up is all,” Twitch grumbled. “Treadin’ in territory that’s mine, and talkin’ to me as if I was his field hand.”

“I want James released before Twitch tortures him to death,” Colt said, undeterred.

“Son, you are cursed with your mother’s sympathetic nature, which does not bode well in the activities of a plantation. The slaves are held accountable for offenses and indiscretions.”

“What is he guilty of?” Colt demanded.

“He’s guilty of betrayin’ me,” Twitch snapped. “Ain’t no offense worse than disloyalty to a master.”

“I am more his master than you,” Colt exploded with more fiery passion than I had ever witnessed from him. “This is a family discussion between a son and father.”

“That’s right.” Twitch grinned. “So maybe you should stay out of it.”

Colt sprang at Twitch, who landed a blow to Colt’s jaw. Uncle Mooney wedged himself between the two and pried them apart. “I will not have the two of you at odds over every issue and decision. You must come to an understanding and find common ground.”

“The only common ground we share is our piss-ass hatred for each other,” Twitch laughed. Colt wiped the blood trickling down his chin and straightened his disheveled coat.

“Father, I am asking you to cut this slave down. If you still regard me as your rightful son, you will grant this request without hesitation.” Tension bent in the air between the three men until Uncle Mooney’s decree broke the standoff.

“I suppose James has been sufficiently punished.” Uncle Mooney put his hand on Twitch’s shoulder to appease him. “No point in adding to our misfortune. We shall work the debit out of him in sweat.” When Twitch stared at him without response, Uncle Mooney called over his shoulder, “Willy Jack, cut him loose.”

Willy Jack complied by taking a suckering knife from the shelf. With one stroke against the rope, James dropped to ground. Colt rushed to examine his wounds, and although James’s groan was gut-wrenching, it served as proof that his life had been spared. Twitch glared at me with tightly restrained fury. When Uncle Mooney turned his back, Twitch mouthed the words *you’ll pay*. His vicious contempt cut through me like a midwinter gale. I looked away, but felt his seething eye locked on me, holding me hostage.

“Miz Hannah, Miz Hannah,” cried out a voice from the murky mist blanketing the fields at my back. “Hurry, Miz Hannah, it’s comin’! You gots’ta come quick! It’s comin’!”

My heart twisted when Elijah broke through the haze. Puffing wildly, he struggled to catch his breath, all the while pointing toward Mud Run. Upon hearing his son’s cry, Winston came sprinting around the carriage house. I tossed aside the shovel and gripped Elijah’s shoulders to calm him, but it was Winston’s reassuring voice that settled the boy. Taking several deep gasps, Elijah finally sputtered out the message he was sent to deliver.

“Mama says to fetch you fast as I can. Livetta is in a bad way. Granny Morgan says de baby is comin’, come hell or high water.”

“Livetta . . .” James moaned as he struggled to upright himself, only to fold back onto his knees. Colt eased him across the ground, then looked over at me. “Go to Livetta. I shall stay and tend to James. Elijah, bucket me some water as quick as you can.”

Elijah darted off toward the well while Winston and I rushed back to the carriage. I could only imagine the displeased reactions displayed by Twitch and Uncle Mooney as I left, but it was too late to care and too urgent to pretend. Anyway, I was already suspect in their eyes.

Winston ran the horses at full gallop on the darkened road back to Hillcrest. Blessed with expertise, he knew the road well and got us there swiftly. We ran down through Mud Run until the light of Livie's cabin came into view. Her screams echoing through the hickories were much like those of James: primal, agonizing, and utterly terrifying. I burst in her door to the sight of Livie squatting open-legged on the floor. Granny Morgan and Esther Mae braced her on opposite sides, rubbing her back and offering encouragement.

"Keep on bearin' down, girl," Granny guided with an air of experience. "Baby be comin' quicker than applesauce through a press."

Livie was oblivious to my entrance. Between howls, the muscles bulging in her face and neck barely had time to unknot. Perspiration and tears soaked the nightshirt she had pulled up around her waist, exposing her bare legs and haunches. Never having witnessed childbirth, I lurched at the sight of watery blood dripping beneath her onto a tousled blanket. Esther Mae waved me over, then positioned me in place next to Livie.

"Let Livetta hold on to you while I fetch de water warmin' over de fire."

"Esther Mae, I have never—"

"Don't matter, chile. Nature is doin' most of de work," she said, nudging me closer to Livie's side. "Livetta will do what needs doin'. We is jes' lendin' a hand. Now go on so I can welcome dis baby wit' a nice soothin' bath, neither too hot nor cold. Every chile got de right to come into dis world fussed upon, even if dat right is stealed away from him in de next breath."

As a haunting wail erupted from Livie, I had no time to dwell on my inexperience with childbirth. All I could do was hold firm to her clenched hand and brace her as she wriggled and pushed. In the midst of her struggle, she glanced at me for comfort and reassurance. I loved her too much to offer empty words, so I spoke from my heart.

"You will be a wonderful mother, Liv. Soon, your baby will be snug in your arms, and all the love you have in your beautiful heart will be shared with a new life."

“I can’t push no mo’, Hannah,” she said, panting with exhaustion. “Where’s my James?”

“You can do it, Livie. You are the strongest person I know. Think of all you have overcome. Because of you, I no longer sit back and watch the world as if I have no say in my fate. I dare to live as I see fit. My strength and daring grew out of knowing you. Allow me to give strength back to you now. Don’t worry about James. He is with Colt, and is counting on me to stand in his place. Now, hold on to me, and we shall do this together.”

Of course, I had the easy part, but my encouragement seemed to breathe new life into Livie. Her eyes grew determined and she shifted her position so that when her body contracted again, she used its force to her advantage. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Thar’s de head,” sang out Granny Morgan. “Keep goin’, girl.”

Sure enough, the bulge between Livie’s legs parted to expose the dark, matted hair of a baby finding its way into the world. I gasped in amazement. Another push revealed puffy eyes, and soon a crinkled nose could be made out within the slick mucus covering the head. Esther Mae eased the baby down onto the blanket as it slipped from Livie’s body. I sobbed with joy. Foolish as it sounds, I could not believe a baby had appeared out of nowhere. Livie slumped against me, crying weary tears and reaching to touch the miracle that enraptured her as much as it did me. “It’s a boy,” she sniffled. “I have a son.”

Granny tied a strip of rawhide around the cord that connected the baby to Livie, while Esther Mae tenderly rinsed his yellowish coating until the beautiful chestnut hue of Livie’s firstborn glistened in the firelight. Livie gave one last twist to finish her part of the birthing; then we cleaned her up and settled her onto her mattress. I sat on the edge of Livie’s bed, watching her nuzzle and nurse the contented child. When Livie dozed off, I stroked the baby’s soft hair and traced his delicate fingers until he joined his mother in slumber. When Granny and Esther Mae tiptoed from the cabin, I pulled a rocker in front of the fire and let the flickering embers lull me into sleep.

Waking to the soft wail of a hungry infant stirred a longing within me. Livie hummed sweetly as the child suckled her breast, making the previous night’s struggle a distant memory. They were propped together on her bed, and I marveled at how naturally she fell into the role of mother. I moved to a chair at the side of her bed.

“You look beautiful, Livie. How are you feeling?”

“My body is as wrung out as a springtime washrag,” she said, gazing down at her son. “But mostly I feel blessed.”

“Have you given him a name?”

“I would like to name him fo’ his daddy, but I ain’t gonna do nothin’ till James comes home. We gonna settle on a name together.” Livie then looked at me with apprehension glazing her pained eyes. “How bad is it, Hannah? If James ain’t here, it means dey beat him lame, don’t it?”

“We got to him as quickly as we could, Liv,” I said, stroking my hand up the baby’s tiny arm and across her hand. “But James suffered a great deal of punishment at Twitch’s hand. Colt was treating his wounds when Elijah came for me.”

Heavy tears dripped down Livie’s cheeks, baptizing the soft curls of her child. “James had nothin’ to do with them slaves in the shed. He didn’t even know dey was there.”

“Even if Twitch suspects the possibility, he does not have proof of James or anyone else planning a rescue. My guess is that Willy Jack is responsible for keeping watch over the shed, and to save his own hide, he convinced Twitch the shackles were made with imperfections to aid any slave meant to be anchored by them.”

Livie pulled the sleeping baby closer to her. “Oh, what have I done, bringin’ this sweet chile into a life so harsh and cruel?”

Several curt taps on the door disrupted my attempt to console her. I went to the door expecting to welcome some neighboring Runians. However, my heart sank when I opened the door and was met by the hard scowl of Aunt Augusta.

Chapter 30

"I did not hear you ride in last night," she said, stepping inside the cabin. "Nor were you at breakfast this morning."

"I returned quite late." I held my composure steady while I sorted out a half-truth to present to her. "On a whim, I changed my plans and had Winston drive me to Lows Hollow to call on Colt. He was quite pleased and mildly homesick, so I talked him into coming home for a visit. By the time we delivered him to West Gate, you had retired for the evening. Near dawn, Esther Mae brought word that Livie had delivered a son, so I rushed down to check on their health."

"Hmm, a boy." She nodded, casting her eyes down on Livie. "Well done." She tugged the blanket open to study the baby's wriggling body. Her matter-of-fact actions made it apparent that she had not come for a confrontation with me, but as was customary, she came to check on the condition of a slave who had given birth. Although the new slave child did not fall under her domain, she seemed pleased. No doubt her calculating mind knew the advantage and value in the addition of any male offspring.

"Livetta, it is our practice here at Hillcrest to allow a lying- in period of two weeks for new mothers. Esther Mae and Tessie will assist you, if needed. At the end of two weeks, you shall return to your duties without restriction. As long as the child is suckling, you may bring him to the house. He is to be kept in the kitchen or in the side yard, as weather dictates. Since Hannalore is your mistress, I will leave it to her to give the child a name."

Aunt Augusta folded the blanket back in place. She turned to make leave, hesitating in the doorway without looking at me. "I shall grant you time to sit with Livetta, but return promptly for supper. I will send an invitation for Colton to join us."

I rocked the baby while Livie rested. Tessie came and went several times, tending to Livie's more personal needs. Winston stopped by with some logs for the fire, and Esther Mae brought a plate of corn fritters and molasses, with strict instructions for Livie to eat every last crumb.

“A mama with a suckling chile gots’ta eat enough to pass strength on to the little one. I’ll fetch you some buttermilk.”

I asked Winston if Elijah had returned from West Gate. He shook his head discreetly, so as not to upset Livie, but the lines in his face deepened with concern as he left to attend his chores. The shadows of the day grew longer, and Livie’s worry over James’s fate swirled closer to the surface, even though she concentrated her thoughts on caring for her baby. Never knowing Twitch to concede defeat without a fight, I wondered if Colt was able to hold him at bay once Uncle Mooney left the two of them alone. Then, as if my thoughts willed him to me, I heard Colt’s voice outside the cabin.

“Run and open the door for me, Elijah.” His voice was heavenly to my ears.

Livie and I looked at each other, but before we could speak, Elijah stumbled through the door. Behind him followed Colt and Winston, with James slung like a scarecrow between them. Livie struggled to her feet and met them halfway across the room. She cupped her hands around James’s swollen jaw and smiled tearfully. “Well, now. Look what de cat dragged in.” She draped her arm around his waist and helped him to the bed. She picked up the infant so James could be positioned facedown; his exposed back appeared hacked apart like butchered venison. “Be gentle with him,” Livie cooed, sliding a satchel stuffed with straw under his head. Winston pulled the cradle from the corner and pushed it alongside the bed where James’s arm hung free. Livie placed the child in the cradle so James could look down at him. Kneeling, Livie pressed her cheek to her husband’s forehead.

“James, this here is yo’ son. I want to give him the name of his strong, brave daddy.”

James winced as he lifted his arm into the cradle and touched the cheek of the alert child looking up at him. “My son is gonna start his life with somethin’ all his own. Instead of naming him James, we will call him Jameson.”

I felt privileged to watch the birth of a family. However, the contrasting images of young Jameson lying faceup, squirming with eagerness, was strikingly at odds with the sight of James lying broken and facedown. The bittersweet scene reminded me how dire life remained in the quarters. It

was then that I noticed Elijah step toward the corner and wipe his sleeve across his tearful face, unable to stop his sorrow from spilling over.

The rafters shook when Twitch kicked the door open behind me. Uncle Mooney and Willy Jack marched in behind him. Startled by the commotion, Jameson filled his lungs and let loose the first frightened cry of his newborn life.

Colt stepped forward to face them. “What is the meaning of this intrusion?”

Uncle Mooney came forward to look at the child, ignoring Livie, who was perched protectively over her two men. He reached out with the tip of his cane and tilted the cradle to study the frantic baby. “A boy,” he said, glancing at me with his face crinkled into a wretched grin. “Based on James’s behavior, I have revoked his privilege to leave the plantation. I want him returned to West Gate at once.”

“No,” Livie cried out. “Please, Massa Reynolds, don’t take James from us.”

“Father, I thought you sided with me,” Colt said, distressed by the turn of events.

“There are only two sides, Colton: them and us. I granted your wish to end the beating, but there are other ways to punish the offender.”

“Is this necessary?” Colt pleaded cautiously as Twitch and his headman hauled James up off the bed. James grimaced, but refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing him beg for mercy. Antagonizing Uncle Mooney any further would make things worse for James, so I motioned for Colt to ease his protest. In a few weeks, tempers would die down and we would have better luck in convincing them James’s health and contentment would produce more profits all the way around. How quickly the family portrait was shattered along with Livie’s heart.

“Jameson*?* How did you come to settle on Jameson?” Aunt Augusta did not hide her distaste for the name. “It sounds territorial to me.”

“I think it’s quite clever,” Colt piped in.

“Well, it is as good as any, I suppose,” Aunt Augusta relinquished. “Next time I would prefer you name the slaves in a traditional manner.”

“I did not name—”

“Have another biscuit,” Colt said, shoving a basket toward me to shut me up, but I refused to be scolded into silence. Tired of biting my tongue for the sake of decorum, I continued.

“I did not name their child,” I stated, to Colt’s chagrin. “As is every parent’s right, James and Livie chose a name meaningful to them.”

“How can you speak with such rebellion?” Aunt Augusta gasped while pointing her fork in my direction. “Such sentiment should not be thought, much less spoken aloud.”

The tempest of outrage swirling within me began breaking free of its harness. “Were you born cruel, Aunt Augusta, or is it an acquired taste?”

“Hannalore!”

Colt tossed his napkin on the table. “Hannah, perhaps we should take a walk. It has been an emotional day.”

Aunt Augusta shook with anger. “I have indulged you in your closeness with Livetta because you have been a lonely child, but you must abide by the limits.”

“Friendship does not have limits or boundaries.”

“It does in this case,” she spat back. “Crossing the line will bring outrage upon you.”

“Don’t you mean it will bring outrage on *you*?”

“On all of us!” she shouted. “Put an end to it, or I shall!”

“Disown me if you must, but I will no longer live the facade of indecency.”

Colt tried offering a voice of reason. “We all have facades to live with. Let us talk about them reasonably before our words do irreparable damage. Maybe we can find common ground to build on together. Don’t you agree, Augusta? We are not so different, really.”

I glared at Aunt Augusta, and deflected Colt’s attempt at compromise by declaring my independence. “I am nothing like her, and proud to say so.”

Aunt Augusta went ashen. She wavered slightly, then waved us to the door. “Perhaps a walk in the evening air is best. Colton, take her away.”

“Augusta, please . . .”

“Go, Colton,” she said, recovering her bite. “And she is not to go to Mud Run. I forbid it.”

Happy to take my leave, I stomped from the dining room and out onto the porch. I had walked the length of the yard before Colt caught up with me. “Calm down, Hannah. You mustn’t push too hard. There is a balance of things you don’t understand.”

“I am going to Livie.”

Colt took my arm with a roughness not of his nature. “See here, Hannah. You have asked a hundred things of me, and I have stayed loyal and true. But if you go down there now, I will consider it a personal betrayal.”

“I shall not be forbidden by Aunt Augusta . . . or by you.”

“Listen to me,” he said, shaking me in frustration. “You have aided a known runaway more than once. You actively participated in releasing the bounty of a dangerous slave catcher.”

“They were stolen from their families!”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Colt snapped. “And don’t forget, Livetta is a runaway as well, living right under their noses. Property of a man we illegally medicated and ran off as a drunkard.”

“I have no regrets.”

He yanked me closer and hissed, “No regrets? None at all?”

“No, not even one.” I delivered my answer with bristling callousness, causing him to release his grip.

He stepped back and drew in a strained breath. “Give consideration to the outcome of drawing attention to Livetta at a time when so many suspicions have been raised. Tempers are hot, and questions unanswered. If you are indeed her friend, then do not bring trouble to her door. Esther Mae will send Tessie to stay with Livetta until I can sort out a way to convince my father to let James return to Mud Run. We must tread carefully and not push too hard. If they ever filled in the gaps, we would all be found out.”

The spark of flint a half dozen paces to our left tore open the night as a small ball of flame lifted to reveal Willy Jack’s expressionless face. He laid the flame to his pipe and took two deep puffs, releasing the aroma of sweet tobacco into the air.

I did not need Colt’s hand squeezing over mine to tell me this was bad, but his grip betrayed his panic. Willy Jack was close enough to have heard our conversation, a conversation that left nothing unrevealed.

My instinct was to remain nonchalant, even though my insides had twisted head to toe. “How long have you been standing there, Willy Jack?”

“Long enough.” He grinned with the pipe clenched in his teeth.

“What, exactly, did you hear?” Colt said in a tone that made me think he might consider killing Willy Jack.

“Oh, I hear lots o’ things . . . here, there, and everywhere.”

Colt pulled a small pistol from inside his coat. “I could shoot you if I felt threatened. Why are you beyond West Gate’s limits? That alone is cause for severe punishment.”

Willy Jack paid him no mind and continued talking as if thinking aloud. “Yas’sah, I hear lots o’ things. Most talk I keeps to myself; den thar’s some talk that be so troublin’, I jes’ gots’ta repeat it.”

Colt cocked the pistol and pointed it toward Willy Jack’s glistening forehead, but it did not stop him from continuing. “So when I hear somethin’ that needs repeatin’, I jes’ go off on a walk in de dark and talk to de wind. Can’t help it if de wind carries dem words to ears dat know what to do wit’ it.”

I noticed my heart had stopped pounding; my fear was replaced with curiosity. I touched Colt’s arm, and he lowered the gun. “Willy Jack, what are you going on about?”

“Jes’ like last night, after I cut James from de rafters,” he said, puffing anxiously. “Marse be mighty furious dat Massa Reynolds let Mista Colt have his say-so. But Massa Reynolds tol’ Marse dat was jes’ fo’ show, so Mista Colt didn’t fuss. Massa said he is gonna make it up to Marse by doin’ somethin’ worse. Somethin’ to show de lot o’ you de way o’ things.”

“Is that why you are here?” I said. “To give us warning?”

He looked me deep in the eyes. “Dey is comin’ fo’ de baby.”

“My God, he wouldn’t,” Colt muttered in disbelief.

“Massa Reynolds say de chile belongs to him. He say James never been no trouble till he married up with Livetta. He tol’ Marse to sell de baby south. He say dat will break de both of ’em worse than strikin’ a whip. Marse say when Mista Colt finds out he got de upper hand after all, it’s as good as tying *Mista Colt* to the whippin’ post too.”

“He cannot sell a newborn away from its mother,” I said, hoping to bide time. “The child could not survive. No one will throw away money on a doomed child.”

Colt’s expression told me I was wrong. “Most plantations have at least one slave who has given birth within a year. As long as she can draw

mother’s milk, any woman can suckle a child.”

“When do they plan on taking Jameson?”

Willy Jack stared off toward West Gate. “I best be gettin’ back. I walked as far as I can go. I had my mama took from me, and no chile should be without his mama. Jes’ needed to set dem words off on de breeze. No, sah, I can’t help if de wind carries dem words to ears dat knows what to do wit’ it.” Willy Jack doused his pipe and hesitated. “Ain’t never walkin’ this way again, so don’t ’spect it no more.” Then like the breeze he spoke of, Willy Jack disappeared into the shadows.

Colt and I stood in disbelief, stunned that vicious Willy Jack had warned us of what Twitch had in store for Livie’s child. “Do you think he is telling us the truth?”

“He has nothing to gain by lying,” Colt said, running a hand through his hair. “Besides, he undoubtedly overheard our conversation. He could have us by our throats right now if his intentions were against us.”

I thought about the welts and bruises marking Willy Jack. He was not used to having the whip put to him. Twitch had turned on him in anger and would have happily killed him had Willy Jack not shifted the blame to James. Perhaps being on the wrong side of a lashing had shifted his loyalty a bit, but the *how* and *why* mattered not. It was *what* Willy Jack revealed that tightened a knot in my stomach.

“I must find a way to protect Livie and Jameson. Let’s go talk to your father.”

Colt shook his head. “It’s to our advantage that he doesn’t know we are aware of his vindictive scheme. Though it sickens me, he is closer in moral fiber to Twitch than he is to me. If he plans to take James and Livetta’s child, it is not solely to appease Twitch. I am certain it is in response to the slave disappearance. Father knows there is a threat from within, and he could be ruined if he is labeled a slave rustler who lines his pockets with ill-gotten ransom squeezed from fellow planters. He is using the child as a display of power and sending the message that he will strike out if challenged again.”

“I will never forgive myself,” I said with a sickened heart. “I left Livie vulnerable in the worst possible way. I would tell her to run, but childbirth has drained her strength. Without sufficient knowledge of the mountain

terrain, Livie would have little chance of escape, especially with a newborn to keep content and quiet. My God, Colt, what can we do?"

"I think we should talk to Augusta."

"Have you gone mad?" I huffed in outraged amusement. "Aunt Augusta hates Livie as much as she does me. The two of us are an abomination in her eyes. After the argument we had inside, Aunt Augusta would garner great satisfaction in seeing me punished at Livie's expense. She is not going to help us."

"Well, we are not going to solve this tonight," he sighed. "But I beg you not to exacerbate the situation by going down into Mud Run. Livetta is settled in for some much-needed rest, and she will surely sense your anxiety."

"How much time do we have?"

"Probably not much time at all. I suspect they have already made some preliminary inquiries through Twitch's contacts. For the right price, any slave trader would take the child and sell him downriver. They could make it happen quite suddenly, although I hope they would have the sense to give the child a couple of weeks for healthy growth."

"Good sense is not Twitch's forte."

"True," Colt said with disconcerting frankness. "For now, allow me to take you back inside. You look exhausted. With a night's rest, our thoughts and alternatives will be clearer in the morning."

Colt bid me good night when we entered the house. His words were tired and resigned with foreboding expression, leaving me chilled as I ascended the stairs. I did not hear him make his leave by way of the front door. He may have thought it wise to smooth Aunt Augusta's ruffled feathers on my behalf. It was of no use. Aunt Augusta and I had reached a parting of the ways. I no longer planned on living in contrite obedience to her rule. She, on the other hand, commanded compliance or expulsion. I believed we both recognized the impasse between us, but ever the peacekeeper, Colt would attempt to negotiate a truce. I loved him and pitied him for wanting it to be so.

I battled my way through a fitful sleep marred by night terrors. Livie crept into my dozing thoughts, the sight of her bringing me comfort, then heartbreak as the shadows of my mind transformed into the menacing image of Twitch. His vile presence in my dreams chased Livie into the

darkness. I called out to her, but my voice echoed through the emptiness surrounding me. My hands trembled as I felt my way through the blank surroundings, not fearful of being alone, but terrified of not finding my way back to Livie. A distant cry heightened my urgency, but the darkness swallowed me deeper. My footsteps took me closer to the restless whimper, yet I could not locate it in the night. I spun round and round until a hand jerked me from my nightmare.

The soft flame shimmering from my bedside lamp cascaded a warm glow across my bed. Livie stood over me, one hand on my shoulder, the other cradling her son. Jameson squirmed and fussed while she swayed to comfort him. I recognized his intermittent cries as those heard in my dream. Livie must have entered my room and was watching me sleep. Dawn had not yet lifted from the shadows, so her presence startled me.

"What is it, Liv?" I said, shifting upward on my pillow. "You should be resting. I am not experienced with the ways of birthing, but Esther Mae says the lying-in period is important to your health."

"Jameson was fussin', so I walked the floor fo' a spell, then decided to walk your way."

"You look troubled."

"So much is happening," she said, easing onto the edge of my bed with the now-dozing baby. "Too much . . . too fast. Can't rightly get my thoughts straight in my head."

I was certain she was not aware of Willy Jack's warning. However, I understood her dismay. In barely two days' time, she had given up her dream of leaving with Marcus, her husband was severely beaten, she gave birth to her first child, and now James was snatched away, leaving her alone and unsure of their future. Guilt coursed through me. I leaned over to kiss Jameson on the forehead, then did the same to Livie's cheek.

"I am so sorry for the heartache my naïveté has brought on you, Liv. You have suffered great loss on so many levels, and I bear responsibility for the pain you are harboring in your soul."

"Don't wanna hear none o' that talk, girl," she interjected, not knowing she had yet another blow to endure. "You been good to me. You care about me with the heart of a friend, same as I do you. Don't never forget that."

"I promise you I will find a way to bring James back to Mud Run."

Livie snuggled Jameson into my arms. He opened his eyes and stared up at me, and then he wriggled his body with a sleepy stretch. One arm broke free of his blanket, allowing me to touch his tiny hand and raise it to my lips to kiss each finger. When I looked up to smile at Livie, her eyes were brimming with heavy tears.

“Look at my beautiful boy.” She sniffled with a mother’s pride. “He is makin’ a promise bridge with you. He’s givin’ thanks and sayin’ the goodness we shared will live in him too.”

Livie slipped her arms around me as I cradled Jameson and wept on my shoulder. I nestled my head against hers and rocked; however, neither she nor I could be comforted as easily as Jameson, who blinked wearily, then drifted off to sleep.

“You must get some rest, Livie. Stay here with me until morning.”

Livie wiped the tears from her cheeks and lifted Jameson from my arms. “I best be leavin’ now. Don’t wanna cause no more ruckus. I just felt the need to come to you. I will always be grateful to you, my friend.”

“I will come to the cabin in the morning with a plate of Granny’s griddle cakes.”

Livie walked across the room, pausing at the door. “Don’t come too early. Wait till midday or so.”

I dozed off, feeling calmer and more determined to derail Uncle Mooney’s revenge on James. Livie’s visit reminded me of all we had overcome to this point, and I could not let it be for naught. The first glint of sunrise sparked me awake. My mind pondered ways to protect Jameson from being sold away, each hopeful thought dashed by the knowledge that Uncle Mooney’s motives were not driven by sensibility or even business gain. His intent was solely to inflict heartless emotional punishment where his whip fell short. No reasoning or plea for reconsideration would be entertained. More likely, it would feed his hunger for revenge. My stomach clenched as every idea forming in my mind fell apart and left me with nothing but the promise of Twitch’s vicious cackle taunting me, as it did all those years ago when he snapped the wings of his captured crows.

Hushed voices near the porch coaxed me from my bed. At this hour, only Runians would be stirring and moving toward the fields, so I went to the window to see who was in our front yard so early. There, in the soft pink glow of the new day, stood Winston helping Aunt Augusta into her carriage.

I had not known Aunt Augusta was leaving for the day, but I could not deny feeling relief. Any confrontation with her would be delayed until her return. Generally when she left at an early hour, she was traveling a long distance, so I hoped the reprieve would stretch into a day or two. Esther Mae looked to be in the carriage as well, so perhaps Aunt Augusta was traveling to Cumberland Gap.

I dressed quickly, wanting to make the most of the day. When I entered the kitchen, I was met by Esther Mae's startled face. A pan of corn muffins flipped from her hands when I walked in. She dropped to her knees, fumbling to pick up the muffins scattered across the floor.

"What you doin' up already, chile? You shouldn't be fussin' about this time o' day. Go on, now," she said without taking a breath between sentences. "I will bring you breakfast on a tray. Hot and in yo' bed. That's right. No need to be fussin' about."

I had never seen Esther Mae so flustered. Her jabbering put me on edge. Immediately, the figure I assumed to be Esther Mae in the carriage sprung into my mind.

"Esther Mae, who was in the carriage with Aunt Augusta?"

Still on her knees, Esther Mae refused to look up at me. "Nobody wit' Miz 'Gusta," she babbled. "Don't know nothin' about nothin'. I gots'ta clean this here mess I done made. You shouldn't be fussin' about, now, girl. Go on upstairs so Granny and me can fix you a fine—"

Panic struck me. I bolted across the room and out the pantry door. Esther Mae called after me, "Leave it be, miz! Don't go down there. It ain't no place fo' you!"

Plunging down the hill into Mud Run, I could barely keep my frenzied feet beneath me. *No, no. Aunt Augusta would not do it. Not without telling me. Her heartlessness had to have limits.* I burst into Livie's cabin, and there sat Tessie in a rocker, humming softly with Jameson bundled tightly in her arms. She looked up without expression, as if expecting my arrival.

"Where's Livie?" I cried out.

Tessie shrugged. "Miz 'Gusta sent fo' her. Esther Mae say fo' me to watch over de baby."

I gasped in horror, realizing what Aunt Augusta had done. I tore back the way I had come, leaving several perplexed Runians in my wake. I was a fool to think I could lash out at Aunt Augusta and not have her squash me

back under her thumb. Now she was cutting me where she knew I would bleed most.

She took my precious Livie!

Chapter 31

My thoughts dashed swifter than my feet as I stumbled up the hill. Livie's papers were kept in Aunt Augusta's room with the other household documents. With her reputation and contacts, she would have no trouble selling Livie so far south, she would be impossible to find. My heart twisted with pain, realizing Livie's predawn appearance in my room was a touchstone to farewell. Her sad eyes now haunted me. Why hadn't I seen that she was protecting me from the truth?

As I crested the hill, I saw Colt's saddled horse hitched at a post next to the stables. I would attempt to catch Aunt Augusta's carriage even though I had much ground to gain. Having a horse standing ready for chase was my only stroke of fortune in this dreadful betrayal. I loosened the reins from the post and lifted my foot to the stirrup.

"What on earth are you doing, Hannah?" Colt said, stepping from the barn.

"I must reach Aunt Augusta before it is too late," I shouted, my face wet with tears.

Colt did not react to my outburst. There was no look of surprise or plea for explanation. He calmly walked over and took the reins from my hands. "Compose yourself before your shrieking brings everyone from their cabins."

I grabbed the lapels of his jacket. "You don't understand. She's taken Livie!"

"Perhaps the compromise was necessary and in your best interest," he said with rehearsed dispassion.

"How can you say that, Colt?" I pounded my fists against his chest in frustration, then spun around to secure another horse from the barn. I walked two steps when a thought halted me and whirled me back to him.

"You knew!" I ran at him and flung my fists again.

"It's not a simple situation, Hannah." He grabbed my wrists and wrestled them behind my back. Fury raised my emotions to new heights.

“You knew what she was doing and said nothing! Why are you here so early in the morning if not to help her with her plan?”

Colt pulled me tight to him. “It was out of control, Hannah. You were putting your life in danger. Your judgment is clouded because you are thinking with your heart instead of your mind. The currents you are treading against are dangerous, and without intervention, you would soon be swept away.”

“Damn you for thinking you can make decisions for me! You are nothing more than Aunt Augusta’s dim-witted puppet. Have you no honor?”

“You may not believe it now,” he said, trying to calm me with a tightly harnessed voice, “but it’s for the best. You must trust my experience in these matters.”

“I shall never trust you again. You are no different from Aunt Augusta. In fact, you are worse! Because at least she does not hide what she is. But you profess to be my friend, even a potential suitor, only to betray me in the cruelest manner. I despise you for your weakness.”

“You foolish, hardheaded girl!” Colt’s face bulged red with rage. I no longer recognized the icy eyes flashing at me with unleashed fury. He lifted me from the ground and tossed me up on his horse, then swung his leg up over the saddle behind me. He leaned heavily against me, his arms around my waist as he snapped the reins. The horse bolted into a full sprint.

“Colt, you are acting like a brute,” I cried out. “Let me go!”

“Swallow your wretched venom,” he shouted in my ear. “I have heard all I want to hear from you.”

I hung on to the racing horse as it sprinted down the plantation lane. When I finally caught my breath, I implored for Colt to stop, but my words flew unheeded into the wind. We kicked up a cloud of dust along the road through town and clambered across the planks of the bridge stretching across the river. Soon after, Colt directed us on a road bending north from town. Colt’s body eventually eased, suggesting his anger may have ebbed.

“Colt, please take me home.”

He did not answer, but my plea was forgotten when I saw dust swirling over the next hill. “Is it them?”

When we barreled over the hill, Aunt Augusta’s carriage with Winston perched at its helm rolled in the distance. Colt let out a ferocious, “H’yaa . . . h’yaa!” The horse kicked harder, and I could see Winston turn and look

over his shoulder. He appeared to bend and say something toward the interior of the coach, then pulled the horses to a standstill. We did not break stride until we reached them, Colt wrestling our enraged horse to a halt as it reared up with a snort, kicking its front legs and nearly throwing us.

“What is the meaning of this, Colton?” Aunt Augusta snapped as she peered through the carriage window. Livie leaned forward into view, her eyes wide in amazement.

“Livie!” I slid from Colt’s arms onto the ground and ran to the coach. Livie opened the door and fell into my arms.

“I is sorry fo’ not tellin’ you. I wanted to say good-bye, but they tol’ me it can’t be done.”

“Colton, what do you mean by bringing her here?” Aunt Augusta glared from the carriage as Colt dismounted and walked toward us.

“I begged you to tell her, Augusta. Did you think she would allow it without a fight?”

I stepped between them to speak my own mind. “I don’t think a more horrible person has ever walked the face of the earth. I will rejoice the day you are dead and gone, because you will be damned to hell for eternity.”

“Hannah,” Livie said, squeezing my arm.

“Don’t be afraid, Liv. I will not let her take you.”

“Listen to Livetta,” Colt said ominously. “Hold your tongue, or you will regret it.” He turned to Aunt Augusta. “It’s time she knew the truth.”

Aunt Augusta’s face hardened. “Not another word from any of you.”

When I looked at Aunt Augusta, she turned away. This was between her and me, and the subtle flinch in her brow let me know my arrowed words had pricked her thick skin. Believing the consequences could get no worse, I began my next assault.

“You are a disgrace to the memory of my mother, and I despise—”

“Don’t say no more,” Livie whispered in my ear. “Not until you know the whole of it.” Livie climbed back up through the open carriage door. She looked at me oddly, then looked over at Aunt Augusta. Aunt Augusta’s chin quivered. After a brief pause, she nodded to Livie. Livie smiled, then lifted the top of the bench seat she had been sitting on inside the carriage. She reached inside and pulled Jameson up into her arms.

“But how . . .” I sputtered. “I just saw the baby with Tessie at the cabin.”

Colt stepped alongside me. “Tessie was holding an empty bundle. So no one would get suspicious, especially if Twitch goes to the cabin looking for James.”

A hand came up out of the hidden compartment, and with Livie’s help, James squeezed upright in the box and lifted himself onto his knees. Aunt Augusta handed him a jug of water and cool rag as he stretched his stiff, sore body. Sensing I had been knocked unsteady, Colt put his hand on my shoulder. I could not look in his eyes after the cruel things I had said, but so many questions were rushing through my mind.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to tell you,” he said, still reeling from my attack. “Truly I did. I believed it was time for you to know.”

“I forbade him to involve you,” Aunt Augusta said with resigned ease. “Our purpose cost your mother her life. I vowed you would be kept safe. It is vital to maintain a certain appearance, a stance at such extreme odds with the abolitionist movement, it would never be questioned. I wanted to protect you from a life filled with lies and hidden activities; however, in doing so, I denied you the truth. Amazingly, you found truth of your own seeded within you. Perhaps a piece of your mother and father unearthed and nurtured. You are so much like them, strong and committed to your beliefs.”

I was shocked by what she was saying, yet her eyes reflected genuine warmth where before I had seen only ice. Winston smiled and nodded, confirming all she said. She was not selling Livie to punish me. Aunt Augusta was attempting to save Livie and her family. Livie handed the baby to Aunt Augusta, then climbed down from the carriage.

“I am glad you came after us,” she said, touching my cheek. “Now we can have a proper good-bye.”

“Where are they taking you?”

“Same place as Fatima,” she said. “You and me didn’t know it then, but when Miz ’Gusta found out about what Massa Reynolds was doin’ to Fatima, she took her up near Cumberland Gap and give her to a man folks think is a slave trader, but instead of takin’ slaves south, he moves ’em north to settlements where slaves ain’t slaves no more. Dey livin’ free.”

“Fatima is free?” I said, turning to Aunt Augusta.

“We believe so,” Aunt Augusta said with humble satisfaction. “I don’t always know where their journey leads them after my role is complete. But

I do know she made safe passage with the friend I left her with."

With my arm around Livie, I stepped closer to the carriage to face Aunt Augusta. "How could I have been so wrong about you?"

"No mo' blind than me," Livie said with reassurance. "Imagine what I was thinkin' when Mista Colt come to get me last night. After him and Miz 'Gusta revealed what needed doin', I almost fainted flat out."

"All this time you have been moving runaways through Hillcrest?" Meaningless moments reshuffled in my mind. I remembered Marcus telling me the "welcome light" was glowing from the window when he boldly approached our back door that first night. I thought of Winston keeping the lanterns snuffed on Christmas Eve when we had a house full of guests. Now all the nights when Aunt Augusta's lamp burned continually or was darkened for weeks at a time made sense. Even Winston's *we've got a secret* grin had new meaning.

Aunt Augusta smiled, taking my outstretched hand in hers. "We have a great deal to talk about. But it will have to wait until I return. We must play out this scene to ensure Livetta's safe exodus. You and Colton must return at once."

I turned to Livie, whose eyes were moist with emotion but now had the unmistakable glimmer of hope. I was not prepared to say good-bye, but her journey to freedom could not be achieved until our path together came to an end. She reached inside her collar and pulled out the rawhide securing the gift I had given her for Christmas.

"Soon I'll be able to wear this ring fo' all the world to see it. Won't have to keep it out o' sight underneath my clothes, same as you hide the one I made fo' you."

I pressed my hand to my chest and felt the ring hanging from my neck, hidden from view for months. She gathered me into a farewell embrace. Accompanied by tears and kisses, I whispered, "I love you, Livie, and shall never forget you."

"I love you too," she said, stepping back, but not letting go of my hands. She raised them to the arch of our promise bridge. "We will always be friends. Our bond is everlasting and will be passed onto our children, and through us they will be connected too. Maybe not face-to-face, but it will be in their hearts, where the seeds of love and respect are sown. They will know the possibility and it will bridge them, as it did us."

I clutched Livie's hands. "I am so happy you are on your way to freedom, because you must find a new path to keep moving forward. You are on your way, Liv."

"You must not view this as an ending," Aunt Augusta interjected gently. "We are part of a momentous beginning. We are sowing seeds that will grow and be harvested for years to come. There will always be weeds and varmints threatening its abundance, and perhaps stormy weather damaging its root from time to time. But even within this plague of slavery, we have found a way to seed a promising crop. Each of us has nurtured it in our own way, and the fruit born of this new field of opportunity will feed generations to come. If tended to properly, the harvest will never end."

There was so much I wanted to say, but Colt abruptly stepped between us and pointed toward the top of the hill. "Someone's coming!" The rumble of approaching horses was unmistakable, although they had not yet crested the hill.

"Get back in the carriage, Livetta," Aunt Augusta instructed. "Hurry, before we are seen."

Colt lifted Livie into the carriage as James wedged himself back into the small compartment. Aunt Augusta handed Jameson back to Livie, who settled him in with James. The lid was then closed and Livie sat down on top of it. Colt swept me back in place on his horse and leapt up behind me. "Go, Winston! We'll try to delay them."

Winston raised his reins, but Aunt Augusta called to him, "No, Winston. If we run, we are declaring our guilt. We must remain calm and look them in the eye. It is the only way to maintain the system."

Her words sealed our fate, but it was too late for any alternative. Two horsemen roared up over the hill and into sight. As was everyone's dreadful expectation, the pursuing riders were Twitch and Willy Jack. Dust twisted like a cyclone as they closed the distance. Seeing we remained at a standstill, they eased their gallop. Willy Jack circled and positioned himself in front of the carriage horses, blocking them from any movement. Twitch swung in around Colt and me, his dead eye caked with dirt and the other flashing bitter vengeance. He yanked his horse toward the carriage, bending from his saddle far enough to level his glare on Livie.

"You playin' me fo' a fool?" Twitch stared down at Aunt Augusta. "Where you all goin' with this wench?"

Aunt Augusta's face had transformed back into the cool, hard mask I was used to seeing. She did not waver at the deadly threat Twitch posed. She snapped at him with icy impatience. "What business do any of you have in chasing me down and delaying my trip? First Colton and my hysterical niece ride out to challenge me. Now you? There better be good reason, or I shall level quick consequence."

"James is missin'. He broke free of his chains and ran off."

"That is no concern of mine," she said, waving him off. "James and the child are Mooney's investment. I am sure you will have no trouble tracking your errant buck. He could not have gone far in his condition."

Twitch paced his horse close to the carriage, scanning the interior. "Went to find out what this uppity slave knows about it, and found her gone too. Don't need no schoolin' to put two and two together. The slave girl tendin' the child didn't want to say where Livetta had gone, but a glimpse of my whip had her flappin' her tongue about you ridin' off quick and secretlike."

"She is correct, not that you are deserving of an explanation." Aunt Augusta leaned out from her window as though scolding a child. "I have deemed Livetta's presence in my household as disruptive and not in Hannalore's best interest. My niece has grown misguided by Livetta's manipulation and plea for sympathy. I am selling Livetta to teach them both a lesson about the necessity of maintaining place and order."

I followed Aunt Augusta's lead and burst into orchestrated tears, an easy feat, since my emotions were so close to the surface. "I hate you, Aunt Augusta! And I will never forgive you for taking Livie from me. Upon learning of your vicious plan, I demanded Colt bring me to you, so we could stop you."

"Did you really think I would give consideration to your ranting?" She delivered her words with the sting of a viper, but when she looked at me, her eyes no longer masked the kindness behind the charade. "Child, you will thank me for this one day."

Twitch scowled at me, satisfied I was finally getting the discipline I deserved. His horse plodded a few steps so he could angle his eye on Livie, who sat with her head down and hands folded.

"Not feelin' so uppity now, is you, girl?"

"No, sah, Marse," she said contritely, without looking up.

"What do you know about James runnin' off?"

“Don’t know nothin’, sah. Ain’t seen him since you fetched him from the cabin. Don’t care none neither; ’cuz o’ him I ain’t gonna see nor hold my baby no more.” Livie spoke in a detached monotone reflecting the spirit of a broken slave, complete with tears of resignation. “Hope he rots at the bottom o’ de swamp fo’ what he done.”

“You brought it on yourself, girl,” Twitch said carefully, examining her demeanor and words. He then leaned in and taunted her with a smile. “I warned you I would be watchin’ you. By midday comin’, your child will be sold to the highest bidder. Remember me when you think of your lost child every day fo’ the rest of your worthless life.”

With a kick of his heels, Twitch pulled the horse back around toward Aunt Augusta. He tugged his hat with obligatory impatience rather than respect. “Sorry for holdin’ you up, Augusta. I best be gettin’ back to the hounds befo’ that darky’s tracks get cold. Let’s go, Willy Jack.”

Aunt Augusta nodded as the two men pointed their horses to leave, but before the knot in my stomach could unravel, a baby’s soft whimper rose in the air, causing us all to freeze. It stopped as quickly as it started; however, Twitch swung his horse back toward Livie. His ears were alive like his awakened hound’s scanning for a sound in the night.

“What in the devil was that noise?”

Not one of us breathed. Our eyes shifted from one to the other, hoping someone could snuff the powder keg about to explode. They strode back toward us, Twitch’s eyes targeted on Livie. He opened his coat, revealing the pistol tucked in his belt.

“It came from her, Marse,” Willy Jack said evenly. To our surprise, he was pointing at me.

As if on cue, I sniffled and whimpered just enough to mimic Jameson’s cry without overdoing it. “Please, don’t take Livie away, Aunt Augusta. I beg of you.”

Aunt Augusta chimed in before Twitch could look closer. “Twitchell, take Colton and Hannalore back to Hillcrest with you. I am weary of her whining, and I do not wish to lose any more time. Obviously, Colton is swayed by her tears, so I need someone I can trust to see her home.”

Her request unbalanced him enough to distract him from questioning the cry further. Willy Jack’s declaration had satisfied Twitch, and the thought of being in Aunt Augusta’s good graces at Colt’s expense stroked his ego.

“I will be happy to chase these two on their way,” he said, losing interest in Livie. He growled at Colt and me, knowing there would be no reprimand. “Let’s go. I got a slave to wrangle.”

Though the danger had passed, my tears did not end. Their flow was real and deeply tapped. Livie and I were about to be parted. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she pressed the palm of her hand over the ring hanging from her neck. I pressed mine to my heart as well, and held out my hand, knowing our promise bridge was ever connected, even though our hands could no longer touch. I mouthed four final words.

In my heart always.

Chapter 32

"Please forgive me, Colt," I said, clinging to his waist as he halted his horse in the front yard of Hillcrest. "I did not mean the harsh things said to you earlier."

Colt shifted in his saddle to disengage me. "Your words delivered the damage they were meant to inflict." He braced me by the arm and lowered me to the ground. Colt did not dismount, but looked down at me with eyes dimmed by strain and sadness. "Your attack on my character has pierced my heart."

"Say it isn't so." I reached out, desperately seeking to reconnect. "I was crazed with fear for Livie's life. Nothing made sense, and in my panic I struck out at you unfairly. I am so sorry and ashamed. Please come inside so we can talk."

"It is more than that," he said stoically. "You sometimes seem a stranger to me."

"You cannot blame me for not offering my heart in its entirety if the whole of you has never been presented to me. Loving someone comes with knowing them completely. Please give me that chance."

His glistening eyes fluttered, revealing the depth of his wound. "We will always be bound by family love."

"We are bound by more, are we not, Colt? We are no longer the sheltered children who strolled in the meadow, prisoners of expectation. We dared to follow our hearts, and have stood together through life-altering trials, never losing faith in one another."

"I once believed those words to be true, until you said you despised me for my weakness."

"Please, Colt." I paused as tears overflowed my eyes without care. I remembered what Livie had taught me about poking a sore. *Leave it be. Even the deepest wound can heal if washed clean and given air to breathe.* I needed to respect Colt's feelings and give him time to heal. I stepped back as he turned his horse around.

“I will be returning to Lows Hollow in the morning. Dr. Waverly and I are making a trip to the borderland in northern Virginia. There is growing tension and reports of a band of Southern marauders terrorizing the region. We have decided to take medical supplies and help with innocent casualties caused by the unrest.”

How could I have doubted his character even for a second? High on his steed, Colt was a warrior of action. With courage and conviction as his weapons, he waged a steady battle every day. He sought no recognition or reward, only the quiet satisfaction of being true to his heart.

“Will you be home for the lighting of the Yule log?”

He had already spurred his horse into a gallop, so my question floated unanswered on the breeze. A piece of my heart had gone with Livie when we said good-bye. Now, watching Colt disappear down the lane, the other half of my heart was torn away.

Not a day passed without my thoughts trailing behind me, remembering Livie and our time together. She would remain forever imprinted on my soul, making me lonely, but never again alone. I was reborn the fated day our paths converged on the mountain. The runaways inspired me to purpose and conviction that uncovered the legacy left in me by my parents. I embraced it as I would them. Upon Aunt Augusta’s return from Cumberland Gap, she sat me down and revealed the intricacies of her hidden gateway.

“We are a safe house for escaped slaves following the river north. The lamp in my room remains lit in my window, serving as a beacon to those traveling through the night. When we feel there is risk, such as when we have guests at the holiday, the lamp is darkened. We also snuff the lamps in the front of the house if the danger is pressing.”

“I remember,” I said, thinking of the image of Uncle Mooney scolding Winston for unlit lamps at Christmas. “And you have managed to maintain such a ruthless reputation while you are doing so.”

“Oh, my dear, I have the easy part. I merely built a clever ruse to protect those courageous enough or tortured enough to break free of their chains and claim their life as their own. I am not alone in my efforts.”

“Who else knows?”

“There is a small circle of us who have worked in secrecy for years. Your father was a staunch abolitionist who believed the institution of slavery

should be attacked from all sides. Pressure for change from the North has been a long, slow battle and has yielded no true results to date. Your father was a man of immediate action. He preached to us, ‘Let us do for imprisoned slaves today what the North promises to do for them tomorrow.’ He believed there were two kinds of sympathizers: those who fought the fight out in the open in hope of swaying public opinion, and those who secretly entrenched themselves throughout the South, extending a quiet hand to slaves daring to flee their present hell.

“Soon after I was married and came to Hillcrest, your grandfather fell ill when fever swept the county. As you know, your grandmother died when your mother was an infant, so when Father succumbed, your mother came to live with me here at Hillcrest, along with Father’s two remaining slaves.”

“Granny Morgan and Winston.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “When your father began courting your mother, he spent a great deal of time at our home. He may have won your mother’s heart, but he also won my complete confidence. When the first runaway came to the back door leading to the root cellar, Granny had instructions to feed him and let him stay the night. So began our secret enterprise.”

I laughed in astonishment. “Are you saying runaways have been coming and going from our root cellar all this time?”

“With help from Granny and Esther Mae,” she acknowledged. “Winston, of course, has a key role in passing information and signals, both in town and during our travels. Fleeing slaves have been led to us through him. He knows of my arrangements in Cumberland Gap and is trusted in every aspect.”

“Now I have a better understanding of why he always smiles at me like we share a secret.”

“I think perhaps he sensed in you the same unsettled resistance that was evident in your mother and father. He recognized it before I did. I always kept you at a distance for your protection. When Colton told me you were nursing an injured slave girl hidden in the cave, I realized I could not protect you forever.”

“You knew Livie was a runaway?”

Aunt Augusta smiled. “Who do you think drew up the false ownership papers?”

“Why didn’t he tell me it was you?”

“Colton is an observant young man. He figured out what we were doing three years ago. Thankfully, he is his mother’s son, and insisted on being involved. I allowed it, contingent on him vowing he would not speak of it to anyone, not even to you.”

“Are there others involved from the plantation in addition to Winston, Granny, and Esther Mae?”

“If our activities were common knowledge, we would have been revealed long ago. We are unseen supporters of the cause, although there may be some Runians who have fleeting suspicions. Elijah is very perceptive, especially with his family playing a key role in our success. Granny’s sister, Mabelle, God rest her soul, helped pass the word to slaves moving through town. Her songs carried messages that pointed runaways in the right direction. A tug of the ear, white to black, signaled a friend. The quilts did their part too. Your mother designed them.” Aunt Augusta held up a quilt and ran her fingers from one square to the next. “Points of reference as clear as the North Star on a moonlit night.”

I was awestruck by the complexity of the plan carried out by only a handful of people, cooperating and trusting each other with no motive other than to do what was right. Yet, as Aunt Augusta pointed out, what she was doing represented only a few safe hours for a runaway whose perilous journey often stretched from weeks into months. I was humbled by the courage of those whose simple wish was to find a better life.

Uncle Mooney and Twitch remained in a sour mood for the better part of two months. When we returned to the plantation on the day Livie left, Tessie misdirected Twitch by saying James had come to the cabin and taken the baby. Twitch never suspected the bundle Tessie held in her arms when last he saw her was nothing more than rags. He immediately sent out the hounds, but the only scent they tracked had been laid down by Elijah leading them west through the tobacco fields, then back again. To maintain fear among the slaves, Twitch claimed they had chased James up a tree, where Twitch took pleasure in shooting him like a cornered raccoon.

“We left his darky guts splattered in the dirt for the wolves to feast on, didn’t we, Willy Jack?”

“Yas’sah, Marse,” Willy Jack confirmed. “Nothin’ but guts all over de ground.”

Instead of avoiding each other, Aunt Augusta and I now sought out each other's company. Sometimes we would take a walk and chat about my mother or discuss the growing unrest between North and South. One afternoon as we watched the stacks of harvested corn begin to rise from afar, thoughts of Livie washed over me.

"Do you miss her?"

I looked over at Aunt Augusta and soaked in the warmth she was offering.

"I miss her terribly," I said, grateful for her motherly concern. "Not knowing their fate haunts me."

"As it does me," she said, pressing a hand to my cheek. "Yet our torture is a mere pittance compared to the countless slaves who endure their loved ones torn from their arms and sold away, never to be heard from again."

I shook my head. "That is why I direct my melancholy into making quilts and contributing to the cause in any way possible. Granny says busy hands are the best cure for a busy mind."

"We shall leave for Roanoke in a few days," Aunt Augusta offered with solace. "A fortnight away from the plantation in preparation for the holiday will be uplifting for all."

"Would you mind very much if I respectfully decline? The shucking celebration holds special memories for me, and I believe will provide a degree of comfort."

"As you wish, Hannah." Aunt Augusta nodded with understanding. "You are a young woman who knows her heart and mind better than most."

When the shucking fires grew high, I made my pilgrimage into Mud Run. I carried with me two large baskets of corn bread I had prepared during the afternoon while Granny and Esther Mae were free of our kitchen. Fiddle music and laughter floated through the night, blanketing me with thoughts of Livie. I was uncertain if my appearance would be awkwardly received without her by my side, but Winston and Elijah rushed to greet me and bring me into the fold.

"Well, look at this fine basket o' treats Miz Hannah brung us," Granny shouted, making a great fuss. She applauded my attempt at baking, even though my corn bread was dry and bland compared to any made with her expert touch. "Come sit here wit' Granny, chile," she said, patting a bale of hay. When I settled next to her, she took my hand and smiled. "Guess we is

both missin' someone we love tonight." With the presence of Livie and Mabelle in both our hearts, we let the music heal us. It felt wonderful clapping and laughing along with so many people I had come to know and care for, but as couples formed and swayed with the music, my heart ached for Colt. Not a night passed without me longing for his strong embrace, but here among the Runians, my sense of loss was unbearable. I slipped away without notice to lie in bed alone, with the revelry below weeping in my ear.

My emotion grew even stronger as the weeks passed and Christmas was upon us. Colt did not return from the borderland, and I had received no letters since his departure. I saw Colt differently since learning of his involvement with Aunt Augusta. I had misjudged him over the years. At times, I had thought him weak and intimidated by Aunt Augusta. I now realized he knew of things I did not, and acted accordingly. As with his doctoring, Colt conducted himself for the benefit of others. My fondness and respect for him grew as the full portrait of the man came alive with detail, and was enriched by his legacy of kind words and selfless actions. The truth should have brought us closer, but instead we were driven apart. In a cruel twist of suffering, my longing for Colt stirred a deep warmth and gentle tug in my tummy, once explained by Livie as the seeds of a woman sprinkled by thoughts of the right man. If only he were here to ease my ache.

As winter pushed into spring, Aunt Augusta and I were called one night from our evening supper by the arrival of an unexpected guest.

"Miz 'Gusta," Winston said, looking shaken as he entered the dining room. "You better come right quick. Ol' Doc Waverly is here with word on Mista Colt."

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach at the sullen declaration. We rushed to the front entrance, where Dr. Waverly slouched on a chair, his clothing mud-soaked and torn, his face bruised and unshaven. When we gasped at the sight of him, he looked up through watery eyes.

"Colt is in grave danger," he said with ragged hoarseness. "I barely made it out with my life. I cannot say the same for Colt. We may already be too late."

Chapter 33

***"W**here is Colt!" I pleaded, dropping to my knees where Dr. Waverly sat weeping. "Take me to him."

Dr. Waverly took a deep breath to harness his emotion. He held up one of his hands to show us that all five fingers were broken and snapped in a different direction. He hitched with pain and distress. "We were overrun by rogue patrollers proclaiming themselves to be Southern militia. They had heard Colt and I provided medical assistance to some sympathizers, and damned us as traitors. They viciously beat us and stomped my hand with their filthy boots. As they struggled with Colt, I was able to escape before they mutilated my other hand. In my retreat, I saw Colt knocked unconscious and locked in a pen. His only hope is that they keep him alive for selfish benefit. With no doctors in those secluded hills, they may need him."

"We will send help immediately," Aunt Augusta reassured him. "I will go to Mooney and we will organize intervention."

"It may not be that easy, Augusta. The climate throughout the South is growing fierce. Marauders are riding the countryside, stirring a cloud of suspicion and fear among slaveholders. With growing pressure from the North to emancipate slaves, Southerners are threatening revolt and even state secession. The unrest has plantation owners holding tighter to those they claim as property. Stories of slaves being beaten and killed based on fear of uprising is stoking the volatility between North and South, particularly along the border. The region is a powder keg awaiting the right spark." Dr. Waverly swayed with his twisted hand pressed against his forehead.

"Let us settle you into a warm bed," Aunt Augusta said, helping him to his feet. "Winston will drive you to Lows Hollow in the morning."

"Thank you, Augusta, but I must decline your kind offer. However, if you would be so generous as to let me borrow a horse, I will return home under the cover of night. I fear I may have been followed and would prefer to be on familiar ground."

Winston saddled a horse for Dr. Waverly. Using his good hand to grip the reins, the distraught man rode out into the night. Winston readied our carriage, knowing Aunt Augusta and I would ride to West Gate at once. When we arrived, several visitors were mounting horses. John Snead, Alexander Moffett, and others known to be active in the vigilance movement nodded as they trotted off. Uncle Mooney stood talking with Colonel Richards when we entered the house.

“Augusta?”

“Mooney, I was not aware of a committee meeting tonight.”

“I must have forgotten to mention it,” Uncle Mooney said, glancing at Colonel Richards, who shuffled uncomfortably. “Accept my sincere apology.”

“It matters not,” Aunt Augusta stated curtly as she led us all into the parlor. She was quick to lay out Colt’s plight and our need to act on his behalf. “Dr. Waverly could not pinpoint the encampment of the marauders, but indicated it was deep in the northwest mountains along the borderland.”

Uncle Mooney stared blankly at Aunt Augusta. “The boy knew the risks.”

“Mooney, he is your son!”

“Yes,” Uncle Mooney said, his face tightening in both anger and anguish. “And when he told me of his plans, I forbade him to go. Colt would not listen to reason, and declared himself at odds with Southern tradition. Perhaps I should have kept a tighter rein on him so he would not have been exposed to wrongful influences.” Uncle Mooney paused, as if punctuating his unspoken accusation. “Colt made his choice. I have no other recourse than to wash my hands of him.”

“You can’t mean that, Mooney!”

“The discussion is closed, Augusta.” Uncle Mooney turned abruptly and left the room.

“Colonel, surely you will help us,” I said with strained hope. “With your connections in the military, a search party can be formed.”

Colonel Richards stood stiff and unmoved. “Colton is a turncoat. He betrayed his family and his roots as a Southern loyalist. I would spit on his rotting corpse before lifting a finger to aid his cause. I advise you to do the same.”

Aunt Augusta took me by the arm and led me out the door toward the carriage. “We are under the veil of suspicion and will find no allies here.” With a jerk of her arm, she halted when she saw Twitch in the doorway of Uncle Mooney’s stable. I was shocked when she pulled me his way.

“Have you lost perspective, Aunt Augusta? Twitch is the last person who will offer assistance.”

“We have no options,” she stately flatly. “No Southerner will help us under the circumstances, but perhaps this unscrupulous wolf will respond if we dangle the right bait.”

Twitch gleamed at us as we approached. “Well, now, what brings the almighty Augusta Reynolds to my doorstep?”

“I will not insult you with the farce of flowery words, Twitchell. I have a business proposition that will pay handsomely. Colt has been detained by patrollers in the northwest mountains. I suspect you may be privy to some of these encampments and may even be acquainted with men who can provide information on Colt’s whereabouts. I am well aware you hold no feelings for Colt, but I will reward you for his swift return. Name your price, and I will pay half up front and the balance when he is delivered to me.”

Twitch eyed Aunt Augusta carefully and tongued a plug of tobacco in his cheek. “All right, Augusta,” he said, enticed by her offer. “One thousand dollars. Have five hundred ready for me at daybreak tomorrow. I will take pleasure in trackin’ down the dirty dog and draggin’ him home by the tail.”

The thought of putting our hope and trust in Twitch chilled me to the core. *There must be some other way.*

True to his word, Twitch arrived at Hillcrest with the cry of the rooster. I watched as Aunt Augusta handed over the ransom and relayed what little information Dr. Waverly had told us about the area of the encampment. As Twitch left, I prayed his greed would ensure Colt’s salvation, but my hopes were quickly dashed when Winston came to us within minutes of Twitch’s departure. Elijah stood by his father, his eyes wide with fright.

“Winston, you look distressed,” Aunt Augusta said. “What is it?”

“Well, now, Miz ’Gusta, we all know Marse ain’t never done a bit o’ good in his life, and he ain’t about to start now.” Winston nudged Elijah toward us. “Go on, boy, and tell ’em what you heard Marse say.”

“I was haulin’ oats to the stable when Marse and another white man rode up and tied dere horses near the road. I never see’d this white man before, and he looked meaner than a badger, so I laid low so they couldn’t set eyes on me. When Marse came out o’ the house and saddled up, the man said, ‘What you tell her?’ and Marse jes’ laughed and said, ‘I tol’ her don’t worry; I’ll fetch Colt home.’ Then Marse spit out his chaw of dirty tobacc’y and showed his muddy teeth. He said to the man, ‘But you can be damn sure that Purebred brother o’ mine ain’t never leavin’ that camp alive. I’ll see to it myself, and have five hundred dollars for the pleasure of it.’ Then he smacked that man on the back and said, ‘Where did you dump Doc Waverly?’ and the man said, ‘He is at the bottom o’ the Horse’s Bend, right where a no-good jackass belongs.’ Then they rode off, laughin’ all the way.”

“Oh no,” I sputtered as my heart thumped fast and heavy in my chest. “No, no.”

I could barely breathe. Winston reached to steady me, but my panic did not ease. “Aunt Augusta, we must go to Cumberland Gap to enlist the help of your associates.”

Aunt Augusta braced herself against the back of a chair. “Coming forward would require them to reveal their activity and allegiance, with great consequence to them and their families. They cannot step from the shadows. Unfortunately, not one among them is familiar with the remote mountains of the borderland. Locating Colt will be nearly impossible. We need someone who knows the back hills.”

We were stunned by the death blow, until hope sprang alive in a fleeting thought. “I know someone who can traverse those mountains as naturally as a deer. There is not a hidden pass or vale untouched by his footsteps.”

Perplexed, Aunt Augusta and Winston searched my eyes for an answer. “Who, my dear?”

I lifted my chin with certainty. “His name is Marcus.”

Chapter 34

***"M**arcus?"*

"Yes. Livie's brother, Marcus." I nodded. "He has made several freedom runs through those mountains. If I can get to him, he will help."

Aunt Augusta came across the room to me. "Traveling northward would be difficult and far too perilous. Bless you for your intention, but there is no guarantee of finding Marcus."

"His devotion to Livie is steadfast. If at all possible, he will find his way to her. There is no doubt in my mind, following Livie's path to freedom will lead me to Marcus. I must do this for Colt."

Winston stepped forward without hesitation. "I'll take her north, Miz 'Gusta."

Aunt Augusta frowned at the thought, but she knew we had no time for fretful misgivings. Finally, she nodded in agreement. "You must take your family with you, Winston. We have done all we can here. Our activities are now under suspicion, and if anything happens to me, you may fall into the wrong hands."

We discussed and organized a plan throughout the day, into night. Aunt Augusta drew up a false bill of sale that detailed my delivery of quilts and some aged tobacco on her behalf. "This will give you some freedom of movement; however, once you ride beyond Cumberland Gap, it may not afford you protection from inquisition. I wish I could go in your place, but I must remain here to intercept any backlash and devise a slow and steady plan to move the remaining Runians to freedom. Perhaps we will use the guise of selling them off a few at a time to settle debts that have mounted in uncertain times."

Aunt Augusta also signed papers for each member of Winston's family declaring them free. Winston's hand trembled as he held them up in the candlelight to watch the ink dry. "Lawd, how is it a simple stroke o' de pen can make my heart beat so? You been mighty good to us, Miz 'Gusta. I thank you fo' givin' us over to ourselves."

Aunt Augusta curtsied humbly. “It is I who thank all of you. You could have requested this day sooner, but chose instead to remain intact, knowing greater numbers could precede you because of your presence and dedication. I have been honored to have you at my side.”

We readied the coach with the hidden compartment so Esther Mae and Elijah could be smuggled with us. Winston feared Granny Morgan would refuse to go, so we were not surprised when she shook her head stubbornly.

“I been with Miz ’Gusta since de day she was born. I is an ol’ woman and don’t know no different. Go on now and be free. I is gonna be free right here with Miz ’Gusta.” She then tucked her signed papers in her apron and went back to preparing provisions for our trip.

We all gathered on the front porch in the twilight before dawn. Aunt Augusta wanted us clear of Echo Ridge before the morning sun peeked over the horizon. As Winston and his family shed tears with Granny, I leaned into Aunt Augusta, who held her arm around me in a desperate grip. Tears glistened in her eyes as she kissed me good-bye. Although left unspoken, we were numbed by the knowledge that I might not return. I embraced her in a loving hug and whispered in her ear.

“I am so thankful for these few months of knowing you as you really are. You are an amazing woman, and I will be eternally grateful for all you have done for me.”

“Godspeed, child,” she said, squeezing me tight. “I am proud to call you *daughter*, just as your mother and father would be.”

Sobbing, Granny wrapped me in her spongy arms. “You be safe, loved ones. We sho’ is gonna miss you round here.”

“Thank you for being so kind to me, Granny.” I sniffled. “I shall never forget you.”

Before Winston helped me climb inside the carriage, I kissed his cheek. “Please help me remain strong.”

Winston laughed. “Now, miz, you know what happened de last time you asked *please* of me.”

I blushed, remembering the lashing he endured over the word *please*. “I shall always regret that moment, Winston.”

“Nonsense, Miz Hannah.” He smiled. “Good things can come of bad times. It wasn’t de best day fo’ me, but it turned out to be de day you met

Livetta. Look how far we all come since then." He winked in acknowledgment of the secret cooperation we shared.

I leaned from the coach window to wave to Aunt Augusta. She blew me a kiss as the carriage pulled away, knowing she had placed me in good hands.

The trip north was tiresome, although the weather remained clear and mild. Esther Mae and Elijah sat on the floor of the carriage so they would remain unseen by anyone observing us from afar. When wagons passed on the road or we neared a town, they crawled inside the hollow bench seat, and I stacked quilts atop the closed lid as added security. After several days, we rode into Cumberland Gap. Winston directed the coach to the livery, where a smartly dressed man approached us.

"Ah, Winston," he said, taking a small crate of tobacco leaves offered to him. "I was not expecting a delivery today."

Winston jumped down and pried open the lid as if allowing the man to inspect the merchandise. Winston did not look directly at the gentleman, but spoke slowly and deliberately. "Miz 'Gusta sent me on urgent business. We got cargo to be delivered to some friends. Takin' it there myself."

The man nonchalantly held a tobacco leaf to his face and breathed it in as any good businessman would do. "What is it you need from me?"

"Remember the package we dropped here during the cusp between summer and fall?"

"Let me think back. Ah yes, I recall that too was an unexpected delivery. Three packages; one no bigger than a sack of sugar."

"Yas'sah, that be the one," Winston said, replacing the lid on the crate. "We need to roll these wheels in the same direction."

The man stepped back and glanced toward where I sat in the carriage. "Are you sure your instructions are accurate?"

I discreetly reached under my bonnet and tugged my ear to signal confirmation of our plans. The gentleman strolled into his office and returned with a lead pencil and paper. Then, as if on cue, he playacted his part. "Had I known Augusta intended early delivery of her goods, I would have had cash in hand. However, this promissory note will satisfy my debt until her next trip to Cumberland Gap. He scratched a crude drawing of the mountains to the west and a line representing the road from town. He circled a dip in the hastily drawn peaks and whispered, "This is Cutter's Pass, where a secluded road winds through the mountains. Watch for the

signs, and use the flow of a rocky stream to keep you on course. Direct your carriage upstream, remaining at odds with the southern current. This will lead you north. Once through Cutter's Pass, the path separates in three directions: east toward Philadelphia, far north into Canada, or deeper into Pennsylvania, where some acreage was purchased by a freedman so former slaves can homestead. They say a few maroon settlements have arisen there, deep in the hills. My involvement ends at Cutter's Pass, so I have no way of knowing where their pilgrimage may have led or if they were intercepted en route."

He cleared his throat and raised his voice from its hush. "Give my regards to your aunt, miss. I hope she feels better by spring's end. Assure her I will pay the balance owed to her when next we meet. Have a safe journey."

I smiled and nodded. "Thank you, kind sir."

Our carriage rolled from town and across the flatland that stretched toward the mountains standing cold and dark on the distant horizon. We traveled for two long days without seeing another rider or passing through a town. With no more provisions from home, we drank from forest streams and eased our hunger pangs with nuts and berries we foraged along the way. Exhaustion and anxiety kept our interaction to a minimum. As we closed the distance between us and the mountains, the jaded peaks slowly rose in the sky as though postured for battle. Small farms and occasional riders appeared in the foothills. One evening as dusk settled over us, Winston leaned down from his perch on the driver's seat.

"See de welcome light," Winston said, pointing at a second-floor window illuminated by three candles standing side by side. "De sign of a friend. We'll find respite here."

I was grateful when we found such a place, because it meant an offering of food and shelter even in the most modest of circumstances. We rarely gained access to the house or spoke more than a few words with our secret hosts, and we always approached by the back door. A shadow whispered in the darkness, "Pull your wagon in the barn. You'll find bread and cheese in a tin on the tool shelf. There's a goat in the stall that will provide all the milk you need."

"Thank you, friend."

“I request you stay no longer than necessary. Patrollers have been kicking up dust from one end of the valley to the other. God be with you when you go.”

At first light, we started again. A distinctive line of trees along a stone-laden brook marked the spot where we turned onto a narrow, grassy road ascending the mountain toward the two high peaks shaped like those on our rudimentary map. *Cutter’s Pass*. I grew quiet and reticent as we navigated the borderland. I thought of Livie and those making the same journey. How could they survive traveling by foot through the night, with both man and nature as their foes? The very thought of it darkened my hope for their safe passage. Harsh reality choked away the fairy-tale ending I had imagined for them.

I dozed briefly in the afternoon warmth until the groan of a gathering thunderstorm stirred me from my slumber. I was surprised to see Esther Mae and Elijah scrambling into the hidden compartment. My stomach twisted with fright when Winston called down to us.

“Looks like paddy rollers!”

Sure enough, the rumble of hooves grew steady. I shielded the sun from my eyes and watched six mounted riders with rifles holstered in their saddlebags stampede down the far hillside. “They look troublesome,” I said, hastily stacking layers of quilts over Esther Mae and Elijah before I closed the bench seat. In practiced motion, I arranged four neat piles of folded quilts across the seat to add to their concealment. I smoothed my dress and bonnet as the six men fanned out around the carriage, bringing it to a halt.

An oversized man dressed in a swarthy hip-sole overcoat strode toward me on an ashen horse. His red hair was laced with silver and burst like rusty milkweed from beneath his wide-brimmed hat. Bush-like whiskers climbed his purple cheeks, leaving only his colorless eyes and a thickly veined nose exposed to the lengthening shadows of the day.

“What business do you have in these parts, woman?” he asked with gravelly annoyance.

“Who presumes to ask such a personal question?”

“The name is Shook,” he said, reaching into his pocket to remove a crumpled piece of paper. He shoved it through the window at me to reveal a reward posting. The drawing rendered on the creased handbill was of a man, dark of skin and hair. Although the roughly scribbled beard hid most

of his features, I recognized the shape of the eyes and curve of the nose. The fugitive they were seeking was Marcus.

“Have you seen this man on your travels?”

I gave the appearance of careful consideration. “No, Mr. Shook. This man is unknown to me.”

“You sure? He’s a smuggler of the worst kind, and I intend on watching him swing by his neck for his bold crimes.” Shook studied me through squinty eyes. “Go on and take a closer look. He’s got a high price on his head, and we are willing to share the spoils.”

“My eyes do not deceive me, Mr. Shook,” I said, handing the drawing back to him. “My answer will be the same no matter how many times I look at this sketch.”

Perched on his powerful horse, he looked down at me through hard eyes. A wave of uneasiness fluttered over me, and although his rifle remained pointed aimlessly toward the ground, the way it sat wedged in the crook of his elbow reminded me that I was no longer in territory that afforded me the respect and courtesy given a lady of privilege.

“Boss, what about this darky?” One of the patrollers had climbed onto the driver’s bench with Winston. With one blow from the heel of his boot, Winston toppled from the carriage. He struggled onto his knees as Shook’s horse clopped toward him. Shook tossed the handbill down at him.

“No, sah, ain’t never seen the likes o’ him.”

“Well, maybe a few lashes will uncover the truth if you are lying,” Shook growled as the man on the driver’s bench unleashed his whip. I burst from the carriage and stood over Winston, shielding him with my body.

“See here!” I stomped my feet, determined not to wobble against the intimidation. “We have caused you no trouble. I wish you luck in your search for this man, but if you incapacitate my driver, I cannot complete my duties and return home.”

Shook studied me with his haunting eyes. “You never answered my question. What brings a woman like you to the borderland?”

I showed him the bill of sale Aunt Augusta forged for me. “I am delivering quilts on behalf of my stricken aunt. We have arranged a meeting with a merchant who resells them at great profit in the cities to the east.”

“A Northern marketeer?”

“I did not ask where he resides. As long as he pays cash on delivery, it matters not to me. I am of the Reynolds plantation to the south, near Echo Ridge. We are Virginia loyalists and expect to be protected by you, not harassed.”

Shook huffed at my claim, but his posture immediately became less aggressive. However, my entire body froze when the patroller with the whip climbed into the carriage and started to rummage through the quilts. “She’s right, Boss. There’s nothing here except a mess of blankets.”

Shook looked at me with disdain. “Well, miss, since you demand our protection while you are turning a profit, I am sure you won’t mind if we reap some benefit as well.”

The man in the carriage whooped with laughter as he grabbed armfuls of quilts. He tossed them out of the windows to the men on horses positioned around the carriage. “We’ll sleep a little warmer tonight, boys! And sell off enough to fill our bellies with grub and whiskey.”

As he cleared the seat of quilts, his elbow caught the corner of the lid, causing it to bounce with a thud. “Well, look what we have here,” he said, hoisting the lid. My heart dropped as the hidden quilts were now exposed: a thin barrier to the quaking bodies beneath them.

I rushed to the carriage. “Please leave me with something to sell. If I return empty-handed, we will be forced to auction some of our slave population to meet our financial burdens. We need slaves to harvest our crops.”

Suddenly, Winston was beside me, with his hat fidgeting in his hands. “If you don’t mind me sayin’ so, miz, maybe des gentlemen would prefer our tobacc’y.”

The patroller in the carriage dropped the lid with a bang. “Tobacco?”

I turned to Winston. I had no tobacco, and feared his outspoken remark would bring fierce recourse. Winston moved to the rear of the carriage and unwedged a large crate from its backside. He whacked his hand along the lid until it popped open. Packed inside was a wealth of cured tobacco leaves. The sight swirled the men in a circle around Winston. Shook joined them to get a closer look. After a long, anxious moment, he grinned.

“Now, this brings a pleasurable end to our conversation.”

The man in the carriage tossed aside the quilts in his arms and hopped down to join the other men. They tied the crate between two horses, and

when they had their bounty secured, they turned to leave. Shook waited until Winston helped me into the carriage. He strode over to address me through the window. “We will consider this a necessary donation to the men upholding the Southern cause.”

“Indeed, Mr. Shook.”

“I advise you not to frequent this area in the future,” Shook said with an ominous smile. “Usually my men are not so easily satisfied.”

As Shook rode off, I looked at Winston, whose face had beaded over with sweat. Seeing the bewilderment in my gaze, he answered the question glimmering in my eyes.

“I tol’ Miz ’Gusta a little peace offerin’ might come in handy. She agreed, and gave it with her blessing.”

“Your forethought saved us, Winston.” As the bench lid creaked open and Elijah’s eyes appeared, I shuddered at the catastrophe we had averted. “Let’s move on. We have a long journey ahead, and I want to ride beyond the hateful threat of people like them.”

“I don’t know if there is a road stretchin’ dat far, Miz Hannah.” Winston’s words were tight with frustration. I forced a weary smile, knowing his forethought was accurate on this as well.

When the shadow of Cutter’s Pass was at our backs, my twisted stomach finally unwound. We had made it through the borderland, but were unsure where to turn our wheels. “If given the choice, I believe Livie would move far enough north to be safe, but near enough for Marcus to find her.” So we disregarded the path heading directly north toward Canada, and the road bending east to the sea. I worried that our search, even if successful, might prove too lengthy to help Colt. So we pressed on, both night and day, with only brief periods of rest.

We weathered several more days without seeing a soul. The mountains were endless as we wound through valleys and up into the hills once more. We rode silently past a small settlement of a dozen buildings burned to the ground, their charred remains remnants of an unspeakable horror. In the slackened faces of Winston and his family, I could see that the North was not the Promised Land they held in their dreams.

In the heat of the day, I climbed up next to Winston to take in the air. The afternoon was alive with birds and honeybees, and as we emerged from a thicket of trees, a vale opened to us. From above, the valley spread green

with fields and a modest creek snaking through it north to south. No person could be seen from where our wagon paused, but several lines of white smoke curled from beyond the nearest hill, marking a town where perhaps food and direction could be found.

We plodded along slowly so Winston could measure the vulnerability of the area. When finally we crested the hill and looked down upon the cabins below, my breath hitched as I surveyed the dark figures milling about.

“What an amazing sight,” I muttered with gaping wonder. “It looks like a well-maintained slave quarters, without the harness of a plantation.”

I had heard discussion of these towns where former slaves settled in refuge from the life they had fled, but seeing it seemed like a trick of the eye. Two young girls chased butterflies in a field barely a stone’s throw from where we watched. One froze when she caught sight of us. She squealed at the other and both ran off toward town, looking over their shoulders to see if we were in chase.

“These horses are parched with thirst,” Winston said, allowing the weary animals to tread on cautiously. “We will water them at the stream below.”

Winston guided the wagon forward as faces peered through distant windows and men halted chores to posture for confrontation. By now, a small crowd of mostly women gathered on the road where it entered the cluster of cabins. Some pointed and called to those busy at work in the surrounding fields. Others huddled in hushed conversation, watching us warily as Winston allowed the horses to clop toward them.

The eyes of one of the women glimmered with familiarity. I studied the details of her face until suddenly it struck me. The woman was Raizy, the hardened runaway first encountered when Livie was shot in the meadow and hidden in the cave. I remembered her cold insistence that Livie be left behind for the good of the group. Her face was now softer and free of bitter intensity, but it was definitely her.

Winston pointed his finger toward a jagged piece of lumber nailed onto an oak tree along the road where we paused. I held up my hand to shield my eyes from the sun. Broad letters carved into the wood spelled out the name of the town . . . PROMISE BRIDGE.

Chapter 35

My heart lifted with hope. A young girl I recognized as Lillabelle, though taller and less fearful, ran toward a cabin on the hillside to our left, crying out words I could not discern. Beyond the rear of the cabin was a large garden sown with potatoes, carrots, and corn. A young woman appeared from between the rows of corn to see what the ruckus was about. She held a hoe in one hand and used the other to brace a baby in a shoulder sling.

“Oh, my God! It’s Livie!”

As if reading my lips, she dropped the hoe and struck her hand skyward. “Hannaaaaah!”

Livie raced down the hill toward us, as I sprang from the carriage and bolted to her. Her broad smile coming toward me made me burst into tears. I willed my legs to run faster, until finally we leapt into each other’s arms, weeping and holding on to one another with joyful elation. Livie touched her hands to my face, and I covered hers with kisses as we convinced ourselves the moment was not a dream. Fate gave me my precious friend back, making my heart overflow with gratitude.

“Can’t believe it’s really you.” Livie laughed while brushing the tears from my face. “I never thought we would lay eyes on each other again.”

I could not restrain myself from hugging her over and over. “You made it, Liv! You made it through safely. Not a day has passed when I have not pondered your fate, but here you are. Here *we* are.” I stroked Jameson’s tuft of soft curls and marveled at how much he had grown. Bathed in our euphoria, he lit up with a smile that made us burst into laughter.

“James, look who dropped from the heavens,” Livie sang out to her husband as he trotted down the road.

“Miz Hannah and Winston,” he called out, waving his hat. “Don’t this beat all.”

They yelped with glee when Esther Mae and Elijah stepped from the coach interior. Winston and his family threw their arms around Livie and James. The reunion felt like such pure joy that tears rose in my eyes once more.

“Take them down to the stream so they can wash up,” Livie said, lifting Jameson from the pouch and giving him over to James. “Hannah and me got a mess o’ catchin’ up to do while we fix us all a bite to eat.”

Livie reached out and touched my cheek. We stood gazing at each other, still recovering from our shock and disbelief. She let her finger run down my neck until it looped beneath the gold necklace attached to the ring she gave me. Then she held out her hand to proudly display my gift, fit snugly on her finger. “Don’t have to hide it no more. Whenever I was missin’ you, I held tight to my ring. Nearly wore it out clutchin’ at it so much.”

“Me too,” I laughed as I slipped my ring off the chain and placed it on my finger. “But even in my wildest dreams, I never imagined there was a way to find you again.”

Livie perked up like a peacock and took me by the hand. “Come see my home.”

Livie beamed with pride as she welcomed me into her modest cabin. “We finally got room enough to turn ’round without bumping into each other.” She showed me the small room off the main quarters where Jameson’s cradle and clothes trunk were tucked with cozy comfort. A loft built overhead served as James and Livie’s bedroom, leaving the main room of the cabin neatly arranged with a simple set of table and chairs, a trivet and cook pot in the fireplace, and a pair of hearthside rockers. James’ handiwork could be seen not only in the framework of the cabin, but in most of the contents within. I warmed with pleasure at Livie’s claim on independence.

We giggled as we had so many times in the past when we were hidden away from the world in my bedchamber. Although it was scandalous for me to feel so, I was overjoyed to partake in warm cider and sliced bread in the home of my friend, a former slave twice escaped, who found a way to achieve the impossible. Using her as inspiration, I wondered if I could do the same.

“Livie, I need to find Marcus.”

Livie sat her cup on the table. “Now, what crazy notion do you got in yo’ head, girl?”

I flushed. “It’s not what you think. I need his help.”

Livie’s eyes glanced over my shoulder, and I sensed someone behind me. I turned as Marcus stepped in the door.

“Have mercy,” he said, taking my hands as I moved to him. “I can’t believe it’s you, sittin’ here like you’re on a Sunday visit.”

“Thank God you are here,” I said as my heart stuttered with relief. “I feared your whereabouts would be unknown.”

“You nearly missed me. I am leavin’ on a freedom run by week’s end.”

“I had to come,” I said with urgency that kept me from enjoying the moment. Marcus settled in with Livie and me at the table, all the while shaking his head.

“Girl, you got powerful gumption coming here, but it’s too dangerous fo’ you to bring runaways this far north. There is bounty hunters round every corner sniffin’ like pack dogs with the scent o’ blood in the air. They don’t care who they turn a gun on these days. Don’t matter if you is white, even less if you is a woman. The hateful vermin are turnin’ on each other, North and South. I overheard two paddy rollers say war might come of it. When you go back home, you gots’ta lay low and don’t draw no wary eyes yo’ way. It be best to leave the runaways to the friends and safe houses already in place.”

I hesitated a moment to maintain my composure. “I am not returning home. My journey is only half over.”

Before I could explain, James and Winston’s family came through the door. Winston shook Marcus’s hand. “Did Miz Hannah tell you about Mista Colt?”

Livie turned to me, her eyes glazing with concern. “I was so happy to see you, I didn’t think about why you are here. What’s happened? It must be mighty bad to risk comin’ here.”

“Colt has been taken hostage by marauders in the borderland mountains. He is deemed a traitor, so no one will help us. I refuse to stand by and do nothing. If the location of their encampment is revealed to me, I will plead for his release. My hope is that Marcus can draw me a map or give me instruction on where these marauders gather.” I reached out and took his hand. “With your knowledge of the mountains, I pray you can give me some direction.”

“I bet I know where he is,” Marcus said, setting off a collective gasp around the table. He nodded at me, then looked at the others. “I know the border area better than I know these hills nestled around Promise Bridge. I’ve led plenty o’ runaways up through the hills where Pennsylvania and the

western tip of Virginny rub elbows. There is a small vale tucked in the hills where hordes o' paddy rollers and other varmints hole up and carouse. I know the way, and my roamin' instincts tell me we'll find Colt there."

I squeezed his hand. "What are you saying, Marcus?"

"I am sayin' every soul here at this table was helped in some way by that man. So even if it means pokin' the beast with a stick, I will try findin' him. I am obliged to do right by a man who's done right by me."

"I'll go with you, Marcus," James said with a deep voice of conviction. "I got a fire in me sayin' it gots'ta be done."

"I feel de same," Winston said. "No doubt about it."

Fear flashed in the eyes of both Esther Mae and Livie, but so too did staunch support. I paused in awe of their immediate gesture of solidarity, and their willingness to take action. Everyone began talking at the same time; the men about how soon to leave, and the women about preparing supplies for the journey. Their voices slowly rose to dull chaos, so they did not hear me when I spoke.

"I shall go with you," I said softly. When no one responded, I raised my voice in firm declaration. "I said, I am going with you!"

Their voices trailed off as their heads turned toward me. I stared back at them with my chin jutted firmly, poised for objection. It took a moment for them to digest my words, but once they did Marcus fired back.

"Is you crazy, girl? You ain't goin' nowhere. It's too dangerous."

"Colt has stood by me from the moment I entered his life. Each one of you has reason to help Colt. I am no different, except my loyalty runs longer and deeper. He has never turned his back on me, even when I gave him little in return. Our bond has remained steadfast. There is not one of you who does not understand the bond of love and friendship, and would do the same if you were me."

"Yo' heart is in the right place, girl," Marcus said evenly. "But this ain't no game. And it ain't no place for a woman like you. You could get killed."

"I am not a fool," I announced to the group. "And I have never swayed or lost resolve in any of the unconventional choices made to this point."

Livie patted my hand empathetically. "No one thinks you is a fool, girl. Yo' mind is powerful strong enough, but what if things turn ugly?"

"*What if* they turn ugly?" I held out my less-than-perfect hands for them to see. "These hands clawed in the dirt to aid Marcus in his cause. Livie,

they wiped your brow when you lay unconscious in the cave, helpless with fever. I stood next to Colt and nursed a town ravaged by flood. These hands may blister and bleed, but they have never let me down. And they have never let any of you down. I have stopped living my life restrained in a corset of *what ifs*. My soul came alive once I began moving freely with the belief of *why not?"*

Livie squeezed my hand, understanding my heart better than anyone. "You do what you gots'ta do, girl." She smiled in support of my decision. "I know yo' heart is the stickin' kind, and not gonna peel off and run in hard times. No one knows that better than me."

"Thank you for your belief in me, Liv." I turned to convince Marcus. "Do you plan on walking all the way to Virginia? Colt could be dead long before you set foot on Southern soil. If I go, we can travel by carriage under the guise of missionary work."

"Three colored men and one white woman ain't gonna pass without suspicion," Marcus countered back.

I was relieved when Winston added his thought to the argument. "Well, now, Miz Hannah has a good point about travelin' by carriage. And we got the hidden compartment, so we can crawl outta sight if trouble comes a-callin'."

Marcus locked his powerful gaze on mine and measured my conviction. Finally, he leaned back in his chair and nodded.

"We'll leave by midday tomorrow."

Chapter 36

The night rushed by, offering little rest as preparations were made for our journey to the borderland. James replaced the shoes on the horses. Food rations, weapons, and the carriage were made ready. And all grew reticent at the unpredictable task ahead of us.

“Come with me,” Livie said, tugging me along the lane halving the town. “I want to give you my mother’s Bible for the trip. I keep it in the schoolhouse.”

“You have a school in town?”

“Well, it’s really jes’ a one-room building where we have our prayer meetings. When I can squeeze time amongst my chores, I use Mama’s Bible to pass on what little readin’ I know. These chilluns need learnin’ to help ’em make their way. The sad fact is, I don’t have enough time or know-how to do it proper.”

I glanced around the fledgling town. Amid the hardship and struggle, these were inspirational people. Fleeing the bondage of slavery, they began as fugitives. Once they crossed into the free state of Pennsylvania, they shed their fettered souls and became pioneers in the purest sense of the word. Living role models of how to begin life anew, they did not let the burdens of their past prevent them from planting seeds of hope for a better future. I was not born of the same plight and did not count myself among the brave trailblazers, but I felt privileged to bear witness on their claim to freedom.

“This ain’t a town of only colored,” Livie continued. “There are some poor white buckra settled in the lower end of town near the creek. They is buildin’ a gristmill. Desperate times can make fo’ some unlikely bedfellows. We is all jes’ tryin’ to survive and make claim on our lives.”

We entered the schoolhouse, which was no more than an empty room with benches lined against each wall. At the center of the room, there was a wooden chair with an open Bible on the seat. Livie handed me her precious heirloom. “Take this with you. It will offer both comfort and disguise.”

“I will carry it with great pride,” I said, reaching to hug her. But before thanks could be given, a cowbell began clanking down the road. Livie’s eyes sprang open and she rushed to the window. It struck five times and paused. Five more and paused. When the third round started, Livie turned to me.

“That’s Corine in the meadow yonder. She’s warnin’ us that riders are comin’. Must be white and lookin’ fo’ trouble.”

“If you are free, what threat do they hold over you?”

“There’s a Fugitive Slave Law that allows bounty hunters to come north to collect runaways and return ’em to their massas fo’ a generous fee. Folks say they is worse than slave catchers, because they often snatch up those with free papers and take ’em back to the auction block.”

“On our trip here, we were confronted by a posse searching for Marcus.”

Livie shook her head. “Plenty o’ snakes south of the border are hungry to get their hands on him. He stays outta sight when riders come through. Promise Bridge is a pretty out-o’-the-way place, but lately it seems like mo’ white folk is stumblin’ upon us in their travels. We try to walk softly in these hills.”

When I heard the approach of riders, I walked toward the window. Livie grabbed my arm and pushed me into the corner. “Don’t you know enough to fear a white man yet? There ain’t much by way of laws to protect us, and them that do are usually scoffed at by whites on both sides o’ the border. Some say a whole town was torched to run off folks like us. Can’t help but curse them for the control they still have over our lives, even here in the North.”

“Why, that’s not fair,” I huffed with indignant fury.

Livie stepped from the window to face me. “Not fair? Girl, I love you heart and soul, but you don’t know the half of it. Standin’ next to me ain’t the same as walkin’ in my shoes. I could tell you stories that would prickle you head to toe.” Her honesty wilted my self- righteous objection; however, Livie was not interested in scolding me. She merely wanted me to understand the immediate danger. “Now, stay in the corner so you ain’t seen. A white gal here among us will only rile ’em up.”

I pressed my back against the wall when horse hooves plodded near the window. Livie stared out at them, steady and unblinking. “What’chu lookin’ at, woman?”

“Nothin’, sah,” she stated blankly.

“Is there a farrier among you?”

Livie pointed toward the blacksmith barn beyond the school. As they strode to the back of the building, Livie whispered, “One of the horses is limpin’.”

We crept to the back window, where we saw James step from the barn to greet the three horsemen. His tight grin did little to disguise his concern. “Good afta’noon, sah. Looks like yo’ hoss done snapped a shoe.”

“Do you think I’m stupid, boy?”

“No, sah,” James stammered, realizing his words were being turned against him. “Jes’ takin’ notice.”

“Well, take notice of *this*.” The rider pulled a pistol from inside his coat. “Now, get your darky hide in the barn and shoe this horse so we can move on. Don’t think of chargin’ me neither. The only payment you’ll get is the breath in your chest. Tell me, boy, is your life worth the cost of a horseshoe?”

James’ face glazed over as he led the horse inside. I held on to Livie, who quivered like a panther ready to leap to the defense of her man. The two men who remained outside surveyed the buildings around them. “All these darkies in one place puts me on edge. If I lived in these hills, I would gather a posse and run ’em off.”

“Well, these ain’t our hills,” snapped the other man. “Rather ’em here than in the flatlands with us. Leave the lynchin’ to the locals.”

Livie’s hand clutched painfully around mine. James walked from the barn with the horse and mounted rider. He kept his head lowered to avoid further confrontation. The man whose horse had been shod nudged James with his foot. “You did a fine job, boy, and quick too. I think you deserve something for your effort.” He cracked the butt of his pistol against James’s head, buckling him to his knees. I pulled Livie back as she sprang toward the door. Livie swallowed her outrage and grimaced, head in hand. The two other men laughed and spurred their horses as the third man gave chase, firing random shots at each building he passed. Livie wriggled free of my grasp, and as we helped James to his feet, I was sickened by a realization like none I had ever experienced. I felt shame and anger; not in myself, but in those considered my people. And in that moment, I learned to fear a white man.

By midmorning, we began saying our good-byes. Hugs were exchanged and tears shed. The danger in what we were doing was understood by everyone, sparking emotion that had us clinging together until we forced ourselves to let go.

The carriage ride down through the western hills and farmlands of Pennsylvania was merciless, with heavy rain that turned the roads into thick pools of mud. Marcus and James rode on horseback, while Winston and I took turns at the reins of the coach. During daylight travel, Marcus rode a mile or two ahead of us, while James rode the same distance to our rear. They ducked into the woods or brush as riders approached, waiting and watching to see if they posed any threat. Living in a free state did not guarantee their safety, particularly with the high price on the head of retrieved runaways. Winston and I, on the other hand, looked the picture of a mistress and her hired man. His age and submissive posture made him of little notice to those who crossed our path.

Marcus led us along little-used roads overgrown with dandelion and poison ivy, and in some instances we carved our own trail through fields gnarled with ragweed. Twice along the way we traded for fresh horses so we could continue to drive on through long days. When the weather cleared and the nights were illuminated by a full moon, we trudged on through the twilight until exhaustion forced sleep upon us. With more than half of our journey behind us, Marcus and James struck a bargain with a farmer, selling their horses for a modest profit that they used in the next town to replenish our depleted supplies.

As we neared the borderland, my knuckles clenched the wooden seat beneath me. Strangers who passed smelled of suspicion and secrecy. Marcus and James barely had enough room to wedge together in the hidden compartment until we rode well beyond scrutiny. Early one morning, six soldiers dressed in blue and carrying the striped flag of the Union appeared on a hillside. They watched Winston and me for some time as our wagon followed the ravine toward a thick grove of evergreens. The sound of their horses breaking into a gallop was gut-wrenching. Not knowing if the soldiers were friend or foe, I held my breath as I lowered the lid on Marcus and James. I straightened my disheveled clothes and sat atop them, the taste of fear on my tongue. I could not help thinking how easily Marcus’s concerns for our safety could become reality.

Winston slowed the carriage to a halt to allow the soldiers to encircle us without protest. I clutched the Bible Livie had given me and raised it toward the soldier with the most decoration on his uniform, but he dismissed the book with a wave of his hand.

“I have no interest in your business, ma’am,” he said, scanning his eyes across the surrounding hills. “But I suggest you proceed no farther. There have been bold attacks and confrontations by marauders on both sides of the border. My own troops have been fired upon twice this week, so safe passage for you is neither guaranteed nor likely.”

I masked my fright and gestured to the heavens. “I travel with the Lord as my passenger and His word as my compass. God’s mercy and favor will provide me safe haven.”

The soldier shook his head with grave impatience. “I fear neither mercy nor favor will be of use to you if you do not heed my warning. Woman, I have no authority to stop you, but if you continue, we can offer you no protection.”

The soldier tugged his hat and motioned his men to move on, showing the same disinterest in my proclamation as he did for my stated mission. Winston had the carriage rolling before the soldiers disappeared over the next ridge. A chill crept across my skin when I noticed the soldier who had spoken to me look back over his shoulder and shake his head with ominous disbelief at our determination to follow the path he had advised us to abandon. However, he had no way of knowing the land terrorized by marauders was our chosen destination.

With the free state of Pennsylvania behind us, we decided to travel at night and take cover during the day. Marcus and James led the way with lanterns, as Winston nudged the carriage along overgrown footpaths barely wide enough to allow passage. This was not the Virginia I knew. The mountains were dark and remote, with no signs of civilized order. The skill with which Marcus guided us through the wilderness was awe-inspiring. Using the flow of creeks, moss on trees, rock formations, and stars in the sky, Marcus moved with the ease of a prospector following points on a treasure map. After three nights in abysmal darkness, the distant squeal of fiddle music and raucous howling should have been uplifting; however, one look at Marcus’s stony expression let me know we were now entrenched with the enemy.

“Don’t be fooled by the playful hootin’ and hollerin’ down there,” Marcus stated flatly as we peered down into the narrow vale where the blazing glow of two huge campfires hung like interlocked halos above the tree tops. “They are neither fun nor happy folk.”

“How many do you think is down there?” James asked.

“Hard to say,” Marcus said, motioning us back to the carriage. “If they was apples, probably enough for two generous basketfuls.”

Winston shook his head. “Odds sho’ ain’t stacked in our favor.”

Marcus patted Winston on the back as he helped him up into the interior of the coach, where we all sat down to plan our course of action. “Winston, I ain’t never drawn a breath when the odds wasn’t stacked against me, but my luck has held out so far.”

“Luck ain’t got nothin’ to do with it.” Winston smirked. “You is a smart man, so you tell us what needs doin’.”

“From here on we go by foot,” Marcus said in a hushed but confident voice. “But we ain’t goin’ no farther tonight. Ya’ll get some sleep while I use what’s left of the night to creep down yonder. We need to know fo’ certain if Colt is here. If so, then I can get a sense of what we is facin’.”

I shuddered at the thought of Marcus brushing so close to the encampment on his own. James must have had the same thought, because he immediately objected. “I’ll go with you.”

“No, James, trust me. It is best I go alone so there is less chance of us bein’ found out. I’ll be back by first light.” Marcus paused for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. “You all must promise me, if I am not back by dawn, you will turn around and trace our tracks back home.”

“We will not leave you behind if there is trouble,” I gasped.

Marcus squeezed my hand tightly, then moved his eyes from me to Winston and then on to James. “We must vow, here and now, whatever happens tonight or tomorrow, we will meet here at the carriage. Whoever makes it back must promise to return home without hesitation. If any of us are delayed, we can catch up with the others along the way. Once them hateful men know trouble is afoot, they will spread through these woods like termites. We is here to try, not to die. Stick to the plan. I moved north and south plenty o’ times, so these ain’t foolish words. We gots’ta promise.”

Marcus held up his hand to begin a bridge of assurance and we all followed suit, stringing our hands together in silent agreement. “Now, go on

and get some sleep." Marcus nodded. "I'll be back with some answers by mornin'." He lingered no more than ten painful beats of my heart, then disappeared into the night.

The three of us had little else to say. Exhaustion and preoccupation with what the morning would bring drained me of my confidence. I curled up in the back of the carriage, but could not still my fears and worries. If James and Winston harbored doubt, they did not reveal it with words, but their quiet uneasiness had me suspecting they felt the same. Winston unhitched the horses and watered them at a stream flowing through a poplar grove where we took cover for the night. He and James shared what was left of our small ration of salted pork, and they refilled our kidney sacks with fresh, cool water. There was no room for appetite in my wrenched stomach, so I closed my eyes in hope of calming my jittery thoughts.

"De creek pools down over de hill yonder," Winston said to James. "Come mornin', it be a good place to wash de sweat and stink off us. Might help if any hounds is set on us tomorr'y."

His words were so matter-of-fact. If I had opened my eyes, tears would have sprinkled from them. However, with so little time to revive my strength, I refused to release even a drop of effort on a worthless tear. Their voices drifted away and sleep settled over me like morning mist on a rose; however, my respite was not meant to last. Tension of mind and body awakened me deep in the night, with nothing to do but stare at the pearl-filled sky spread above me. The anguish stirring inside me brought to mind a starry night of yesteryear when my naïveté was torn from me by the sight of Uncle Mooney on top of defenseless Fatima. I remember searching the stars for comfort, as I was doing now, only to be swallowed by despair in knowing any small droplet of decency I gave to the Runians was lost in a sea of cruelty. Another surge from the wretched tide of hate would surely be faced in the morning.

When the first hint of the rising sun grayed the sky, I rose and walked among the trees to where the stream cupped within a small hollow. At the far end of the pool, the water tumbled down a rock ledge and disappeared into the wilderness below. The glistening ripples beckoned me to shed my soiled clothing and immerse into the cool pond. I untied my hair so it fell around my shoulders and rinsed the grime of the road from my clammy skin. Slipping beneath the surface, I let the mild current gently flow through

my hair. I tilted my head back and arched atop the water to float on my back. My aching body eased in the caress of the stream.

Suddenly, a deep splash plunked behind me, and the tight grip of a hand grabbed my arms and yanked me backward, dragging me through the water. A terrifying scream tore from my throat, but I was immediately plunged beneath the surface. Just as quickly, I was pulled up, spitting and sputtering for breath. All around me the long, heavy strands of a willow hung into the water like a curtain draped from branch to stream. In one forceful motion, I was swirled around in the waist-deep water. With two panicked blinks, the water drained from my eyes, clearing my vision.

"Marcus!" He stared down at me, wide-eyed and trembling, and I realized he was as shaken as I. "What is it? Is it Colt?"

"Do you know what could happen to you here alone? The thought of one of these dirty rascals stumbling onto you like this . . ."

One thought twisted me from head to toe. A need so strong it rose from my depths, bringing with it the only words that mattered to me. "Did you find Colt?"

Marcus hesitated, then nodded. "He looks to be breathin', but most o' the life has been beat outta him. He is hog-tied in a pen with two coloreds." Marcus looked at me intently. "That one- eyed snake is there watchin' over him."

"Twitch? My God, we must free Colt as quickly as possible. Twitch will torture him into an early grave, and take pleasure in doing so."

Marcus removed his shirt and wrapped it around me. "We'll go when tonight's moon rises."

"I know you are against me accompanying you, but . . ."

"All four of us will go," he said, not making me plead for his approval.

"Thank you, Marcus." I was relieved that he understood my need to provide support in Colt's rescue. "I must do all I can for him, no matter the outcome."

"I am sorry for bein' so hard on you about comin'. You ain't never stood in the way of me doin' what I gots the need to do. You deserve the same respect. I jes' didn't want no harm to come to you."

"I carry the same fear for you," I said, pressing my hand to his cheek. "A painful honor that comes with caring about one another."

There, with the weeping willow falling around us, my heart grew heavy with a foreboding notion that our lives would never be the same.

Chapter 37

"Does anyone have any questions?" Marcus had carefully scratched a rough sketch in the soft dirt, marking where men, wagons, and tents were arranged in the narrow vale. Two crisscrossed lines pinpointed the pen imprisoning Colt. "There is roundabout two dozen men, but we are favored by surprise. They don't know we is here."

"Mo' men means mo' guns," James said, studying the drawing. "We only got two worn-out rifles 'tween us."

"Ain't no gettin' around that fact," Marcus said flatly. "But it ain't easy hittin' a movin' target in the dark. Their first instinct will tell 'em the attackers are comin' from the main road windin' down from the north. They won't expect it comes from behind by way o' the eastern ridge. We gots'ta be quick and scatter back into the woods befo' they get their wits about 'em."

Winston traced a line with his finger leading from the encampment back to the circle representing our carriage and point of escape. "Say again how we meet up after we tussle with them low-down dogs."

"After we move down the mountain at dusk, we'll spread apart about twenty to thirty paces with me leading the way, followed by Winston, Hannah, and then James in the rear. When we is close enough to taste the smoke of their campfire, we'll spread out to the points I marked here in the dirt. I will go to the edge of camp closest to where Colt is penned up and wait for the first shot to be fired. Winston, you and James take the guns and go to the far end of camp where the vale opens up toward the main road. Stay hidden in the trees, but get close enough to scare them from their blankets when you shoot them guns into the sky. If they think they is under fire from the soldiers they been scufflin' with, it should stir 'em good and give me my best chance at fetchin' Colt during the commotion. Hannah, you hang back some and stay hidden while we all get to our places. If you see any strangers scoutin' the woods, signal us. Can you do a call like a hoot owl?"

I shrugged. "I've never tried, but Colt taught me how to coo like a dove."

“I guess that will have to do.” Marcus nodded his encouragement, then continued with his instructions. “Once you boys crack off a half-dozen shots, you get on back to the carriage as fast as you can, before them rascals figure out they ain’t in any real danger. That means you too, Hannah. If the plan works in our favor, I will be on your heels with Colt in tow. When two or more o’ you have made it back here, wait no mo’ than the time it would take to pluck a chicken, then get these wheels rollin’ fo’ home. Any stragglers will catch up somewhere down the road. That gots’ta be the way of it. Do you all understand?”

I bristled at the thought. “What if only one of us has returned?”

Marcus took my hand. “You gots’ta leave before the night sky starts graying toward sunup, no matter who is here or who is not here. I know yo’ heart will tell you different, but remember when I had to leave Livetta behind when she got shot? It gots’ta be done to give all of us the best chance of gettin’ away. If any of us runs into trouble or gets delayed, we will follow on home. Jes’ keep a watch on the horizon.”

We all nodded in solemn agreement. I looked at each man, wishing to thank them for their courage, but I did not want my words to sound like I was bidding them farewell. Planting the seed of possible failure would do them no favor.

We were swift when the time came to move down the mountain. Moonlight trickled through the thick treetops, helping us navigate the rocky terrain. Marcus stopped in short intervals, leaving clues for us to follow later when we retraced our steps without his assistance. Simple and discreet, he placed three fist-sized stones at the base of intermittent trees, arranged horizontally in the direction to move. Indistinguishable to others, they served as our road map back to the carriage.

The first hint of smoky aroma in the air made my heart teeter. Soon, I could barely breathe; not because of our pace or the increasing smoke, but because we were closing in on our target. Ahead of me, Winston waved for me to stop. The sight of a rifle in his hand made evident the grave point we had reached. He took off to the right toward the lower pass and disappeared into the shadows. James’s footsteps approached me from behind. When he saw me in the moonlight, he turned and followed in Winston’s tracks.

About two hundred paces in front of me, Marcus stepped from behind a tree. He faced me, although we were no more than silhouettes in the night.

He raised one hand and then the other, completing his distant half of a promise bridge. I raised each of my hands in return, holding them high until he had gone. I stood alone in the forest, unprepared for the sudden wave of despair that washed over me. It had been a long time since I felt useless, and the feeling did not sit well with me. Simply to wait and watch seemed purposeless. There had to be more I could do. My conscience whispered at first, then grew into a prodding roar. I swooped up the hem of my skirt and sprinted after Marcus. My intent was not to distract him, so I softened my steps when I caught a glimpse of him in the distance.

The flicker of flames reflected a kaleidoscope of orange and gold through the trees ahead of me. The length of the camp stretched out to my right toward the northern pass. Marcus disappeared again into the shadows along the backside of the camp. I guessed he was circling to the other side, perhaps to better position himself. I crept among the trees until I could see where the clearing spread wide. Crawling into a thicket of mountain laurel, I pulled back a branch to behold the enemy. Two fires crackled, their flames low to the ground and restrained for the night. One flickered far to my right, where James and Winston had run. At least twenty horses were secured to two long ropes tied along the tree line edging each side of the camp. I was relieved the animals were at a distance and not likely to stir at my presence. From my vantage point, there were at least four wagons as well. What was hidden in the darkness beyond the ring of firelight was uncertain. Lumps of blankets were scattered throughout the camp. Each one rose and fell in rhythm with the dozing breaths of men wrapped within. A log in the fire nearest me suddenly snapped and split in two, lifting a burst of hot sparks up into the blackness. There in the hellish eruption, I saw him.

Twitch. He sat against a jagged rock directly across the camp from me. His hat was pulled down over his eyes, but there was no mistaking his worn snakeskin boots. He looked to be on guard, with arms folded across his chest and his shotgun propped between his knees, but the intermittent rising of his shoulders gave away his surrender to sleep. Just beyond the glow of the fire was a pen built the size of three wagons side by side. The structure was barely waist-high, and hunched within were three dark figures. My heart twisted although I could not distinguish which of these men was Colt. How I wished I could shoot Twitch between the eyes for what he had done.

Everything spread before me jolted when the bang of a rifle echoed through the vale from the area near the pass. Instantly, the men scrambled for weapons and the horses cried as they kicked and bumped each other in spooked terror. Twitch bolted upright as well, and by the time the second shot rang out, he was in full battle mode. Voices barked back and forth.

“Soldiers comin’ from the pass!”

“Get the gunpowder from the wagons,” another snarled.

Then a crazy yelp prickled the hairs on the back of my neck. “Yeehaaaw, we got us a fight!” Through the shadows, I saw the bounty hunter Shook raise a rifle over his head. “Come on, boys, let’s whup some Yankee ass!”

Everyone, including Twitch, took up arms in the direction of the shooters. The moment our end of the camp cleared of men, Marcus burst from the trees to my left. In his grasp was a large rock, which he used to pound against the padlock securing the pen. Marcus landed a fierce blow to the lock, cracking it into three pieces. He yanked the door off its hinges and tossed it aside. One imprisoned slave scrambled out, knocking Marcus aside as he broke free into the night. The next man crawled out, laboring on cramped legs.

“Which way is north?” he pleaded, as Marcus helped him to his feet. “I gots’ta go north!”

Marcus pointed up the mountainside, but before he could give the freed man any more direction, he limped into the tree cover. I turned back and saw Marcus crouched inside the pen, pulling Colt to the door. When they emerged, Colt was cramped and unable to straighten. Marcus braced his shoulder beneath Colt’s underarm and lifted him to his feet. Colt’s lips and left cheek were swollen to the point of distortion. Even his parched voice was barely recognizable. His injuries of limb and body appeared numerous, but he fought to right himself for flight. “Marcus?” His cloudy eyes glimmered slightly before a wave of dizziness buckled his knees.

“Stand strong, friend,” Marcus urged gently. “We gonna get you out of here.”

I could not stay idle, but no sooner had I unfolded from my tucked position when footsteps crunched along the tree line past me. Nearly exposed, I dropped back into the bushes and watched the lone figure stop halfway between me and where Marcus struggled with Colt.

“Well, looky here,” sniggered a familiar voice, oozing with anger and surprise. He had his back to me so his face was hidden, but I recognized Twitch’s mocking tone. “I always heard folks talk about killin’ two birds with one stone, but the sight o’ the two of you is just too sweet.”

The haunting click of his thumb pulling the hammer back on his shotgun bolted me from the laurels. I leapt on Twitch’s back as his gun fired. My unexpected blow knocked him forward, sending his shot ripping through the trees above us. Twitch swung his elbow around and drove it into my side, pummeling me onto the ground. I gasped for air as the stars above swirled. Colt’s shocked voice brought me to my senses. “Hannah!”

The protective glint I had so often seen in his eyes sparked alive. He and Marcus broke toward me, but before they hit their second stride, Twitch pulled a pistol from his belt and blasted it at them. Marcus moved to shield Colt, but the shot knocked them backward through the air and onto the ground. I screamed in horror, but within seconds, Twitch dropped over me with his knees straddling my waist. He locked his hands on my throat until my cries were choked within me.

“Now, I am gonna do to you what my wicked fantasies have been doin’ for years. You hear me, girl? Then when my lust is drained and vengeance delivered, I will drive my huntin’ knife through your darkylovin’ heart.”

Twitch chomped his mouth over mine. His slimy tongue pushed to separate my lips. I swung my arms, landing punches against his shoulders and face, but my strength was not enough. His long, rough fingers shackled my wrists in one of his hands. His triumphant cackle grew as he straightened up and started to unbuckle his belt with his other hand. His face bristled with hatred as my futile struggle against him fed his fury. Suddenly, a deafening shot rang out. Smoke puffed from Twitch’s vest. His fingers twisted my wrists, then eased. He looked down at me, his eye slowly glazing over until it stared sightless, matching the other, long dead. He fell forward into the dirt next to me. Behind him stood Winston, his rifle still smoking. He lowered his gun and looked at Twitch’s lifeless body. “Lawd help me, but I did de world a favor gettin’ rid o’ de likes o’ you.” Winston tossed the gun aside and rushed over to me. “You all right, Miz Hannah?”

Everything had happened so fast. I looked over at Marcus and Colt tangled in a motionless heap. I rolled over and frantically crawled in their

direction.

“No, no, no!”

A bullet snapped against the ground near my hand. Excited voices called out from the far edge of the camp. “Did you hear them shots?” one voice shouted.

Another voice answered, “Someone is back yonder! I had ’em in my sights but missed. Load up quick!”

I was an arm’s length from where Marcus and Colt lay. I reached for a limp hand, but was yanked to my feet before we touched. Winston pulled me toward the woods. Bullets nipped at our heels, giving us no time for turning back.

“We can’t leave them, Winston!”

“Jes’ run faster,” he said, tightening his grip on my arm. “Or we is as good as dead.”

My feet obeyed and did not stop as shotgun blasts popped from every direction. Darkness was our cohort, and with its assistance, Winston and I slipped through the trees, safely away from the onslaught. My heart and soul, however, were stripped from me and left abandoned in the smoky encampment. When we arrived at the carriage, we found no one there, adding James to our fears and worries.

“We gots’ta do what Marcus tol’ us, Miz Hannah. He said we gots’ta go even if yo’ heart is beggin’ us to stay.”

My mind was a blur as Winston nudged the carriage into the waning night for our journey home to Promise Bridge. The sound of the wheels creaking into motion crushed my heart.

Midway through our second day, James burst from a poplar grove and ran toward us, waving his arms with relief. I hugged James, as did Winston, grateful for his escape.

“My path to de carriage got cut off by dem crazy paddy rollers when they doubled back to de camp. I didn’t know what to make of all de gunfire, so I laid low till they pulled together and rode off in a posse lookin’ for us by way of de road. They never thought to look up along the brow of the mountain, jes’ like Marcus figured.”

When Marcus’s name jumped from his lips, James halted his story. My tears rose but did not fall as I hugged James again. He glanced around, realizing there were only three of us. He looked at Winston with grave

concern. I did not want to relive Winston's account of our misfortune so I climbed inside the carriage. My misty eyes groped the receding southern horizon, holding on to hope. Perhaps Colt and Marcus would appear just as James had done, in accordance with our plan.

"De men came at us like swarmin' hornets," Winston said painfully. "We had no choice but run befo' it was too late."

James patted Winston on the shoulder. "Don't hang yo' head, ol' man. You done what needed doin'. Mista Colt would be mighty grateful knowin' you saved her from de hands of de devil."

I sank across the bench seat and curled into myself like a child. I am not certain how long I drifted in a state of confused disbelief before sinking into the darkness of utter despair, but I was no longer aware of the passing of night or day. Truth be told, I no longer cared.

Chapter 38

My clothes were dampened by the drizzle of a weepy morning. With arm and head resting on the window frame of the coach, I let the rain spatter my face until the familiar twist of the oak trees along the roadside coaxed me from my stupor. My heart lifted and then wrenched as the road ahead sloped into the emerald valley nestling Promise Bridge. Wisps of smoke swirled from the chimney of each simple cabin, a sight that greeted us like an oasis in a dark abyss. Sadly, the scene brought no relief for the ache in my heart. As we descended into the bosom of the town, Raizy emerged from her cabin and threw her arms up when she saw us coming down the hill. She ran the path to Livie's door and shouted our arrival. Livie burst through the doorway, followed by Esther Mae and Elijah. I leapt from the carriage and ran the distance between us. Seeing my urgency, Livie rushed up the hillside toward me, where she caught me in her arms. She asked no questions, but held tightly to me as I wept. Looking over my shoulder, she saw her husband was safe, but when a low moan rose from her, I knew she understood her beloved brother had not returned.

James put his huge arms around us. He respected our need for tears before steadying us with his calm words. "Let's go inside to warm ourselves. Gatherin' with loved ones is de only recipe I know for easin' de pain of a sorrowful day."

James was right. I found immeasurable comfort the moment we entered Marcus's cabin and were surrounded by so many caring friends. I held tightly to Livie's hand, knowing her pain ran as deep and sharp as mine. The group nodded sympathetically when I insisted we should not assume the worst. "Marcus said we should keep our eyes on the horizon. If delayed, they will follow us home."

Their sad smiles did little to disguise their doubt or lift my confidence. I was dizzy with exhaustion. My last conscious thought was of Livie wrapping me in a blanket and pulling me close.

The next morning, I awoke to the aroma of ashcakes baking in the hearth. Esther Mae had stayed with me in Marcus's cabin, in part because the cabin

the townsmen were building for Winston's family had not been completed. I also suspected she wanted to watch over me as I came to terms with what had transpired.

"After you rest a day or two," Esther Mae said, handing me a cup of tea, "Winston will find out where de nearest stagecoach passes, and we'll get you on yo' way home."

I set the cup aside, unwilling to accept the finality of her suggestion. I immediately went to find Livie. Tears crested my eyes when I saw her working in her garden. Livie paused when she saw me.

"Hey, girl," she said, wiping the back of her hand across her moist forehead. "Thought I would pass some time turnin' the garden bed."

I picked up a hoe and tilled the soil in the row next to her. "Granny always said busy hands are the best cure for a busy mind."

"I know what you mean, girl," she said, immersing herself in the physical outlet we both needed to expend our bulging emotions. "Best to keep busy so our low-down thoughts can't root too deep."

I scratched at the earth, but it did not prevent my heart from spilling over. Within seconds, I was halted by a sentiment that needed to be spoken. Feeling my eyes upon her, Livie stopped and looked up. Instantly, I unraveled like a tumbling ball of yarn.

"Livie, I am so sorry."

Before I could speak another word, Livie dropped her hoe and stepped into my arms. She hugged me tightly and whispered, "Don't you say such a thing, Hannah. Don't you even think it."

We held on to each other, sharing our heartbreak. We understood each other's pain, seeking comfort and giving support within our embrace. *My dear friend. My trusted companion.* Our relationship had changed my life in more ways than I could count, and together again we turned to each other as we faced the unknown.

After a moment, Livie eased her grip as if distracted by something over my shoulder. She took a step back, staring toward the road that dropped into town. "Looky yonder," she said, squinting into the sun. "Who is that comin' down the hill?"

I turned and saw a buckboard pulled by a lone horse barely able to plod its hooves down the dirt path. A man sat hunched over the reins, the brim of his hat tugged low on his brow. Mending a fence nearby, Winston and

James set down their hammers and walked toward the road where it entered town. We hurried after them, but they picked up their pace as if realizing the figure ahead was no stranger. I rushed to join them when I recognized the cut of Marcus's hat. Closing the distance, I grew doubtful, because the build of the man was not as broad as that of Marcus. I slowed with disappointment until his head lifted to reveal gold-flecked brown eyes glistening with tears.

"Colt!" I burst into a full sprint, my feet stumbling to keep pace with my racing heart. "Colt!" His name desperately spilled from me over and over as I ran toward him.

He leaned from the wagon seat and tumbled into Winston's arms. "Easy does it, Mista Colt. I got you."

No sooner had Winston pulled him upright than Colt looked up and saw me running toward him. The wince of his brow told me he was battling tears, but our gazes connected and bound us like a lifeline neither wanted to release. At full stride, I threw myself in his arms, and if not for Winston bracing us, we would have toppled over onto the ground. The feel of his arms around me, and he within mine, burst tears and laughter from me with dizzying elation. His gaunt frame wobbled, and I realized he was seriously injured. I softened to steady him, all the while stroking his cheeks and pulling him closer.

"I knew there was hope for you and Marcus!" I exclaimed as I stroked my fingers through his curls, needing to caress him to believe he was not a daydream. "No one could convince me otherwise. If there was an avenue of escape, I knew the two of you would find it. Did Marcus continue south to begin his next freedom run?"

Colt leaned against me, his expression gray with exhaustion. With my assistance, he limped to Livie and hugged her gently. His mouth remained pulled tight in silence when he reached out and shook James's hand. Both men were somber as Colt turned back to me with deep sorrow puddled in his eyes. My gaze was drawn beyond him to the rear wagon bed, where an oblong pine box was secured with ropes. James gathered Livie in his arms as she sniffled against his chest. Colt took my hand and led me to the side of the buckboard. He placed his hand on the corner of the pine box and spoke softly.

“I brought him home so he can be buried in the free soil of Promise Bridge, where at the end of his long, courageous journey, Marcus can rest in peace. For all he has done to give that gift to others, he deserves to lie down a free man.”

Warm tears streaked my face. Colt removed the hat he was wearing, which did indeed belong to Marcus, and handed it to me. “Here is a physical remembrance that may offer a degree of comfort.”

His sentiment confused me, but he was clearly in a shattered state. When Livie stepped to my side, I gave her the hat and wrapped her in my arms.

Livie pressed Marcus’s hat against her breast and let her tears flow. Resting my head against her heaving shoulders, I was thankful Marcus was home. Deep inside, we feared this moment would someday come; the risks of his conviction made it inevitable. But I was not ashamed to admit that the shock of sudden loss was numbing.

Suddenly, Colt’s legs wilted beneath him and he collapsed with a groaning thud. Winston and James scooped him from the ground and moved him into the cabin. “Be gentle with him,” I implored as we settled his dangling limbs onto the bed. “Elijah, please bring me some water from the well and any poultice your mother has on hand.”

Caring for Colt brought me momentary solace as grief enveloped Promise Bridge. His injuries were numerous, but my experience during the flood had given me knowledge of how to stabilize his broken arm, and lance severely infected wounds left untreated while he’d been imprisoned at the militia camp. Unfortunately, I had no medicine to ease his fever or pain, nor had I training to diagnose his internal maladies. Colt remained unconscious and in a fragile condition. Dozing in the rocker next to his bed, I kept vigil through the night so I would be near if he stirred or reached out. The following morning, Livie found me curled next to Colt as she entered the cabin. She wore a simple black dress and head wrap. She did her best to remain stoic, but heartbreak spilled from her eyes.

“We are burying Marcus in the upper meadow. If you want to join us, Elijah and Lillabelle will sit with Colt.”

I gathered her in my arms and squeezed her to me. I fought back guilt and remorse for the outcome that had taken her brother’s life. I loved and respected her too much to allow my feelings to eclipse her sorrow. We walked to the top of the hill, along with James and a congregation of

townsfolk. The pine box had already been lowered into a grave dug by Winston and Letchworth Lamar. I had met Letchworth only once, the first day I arrived at Promise Bridge. I remembered him clearly because his demeanor had been so angry and standoffish. Today was no different. He leaned against his shovel, his eyes fixed on me like I was an unwelcome intruder.

“Why are there two holes?” Livie asked. I looked past Letchworth and saw the second grave in the far shadows of a willow.

“I figured I would save myself the trouble of digging again tomorrow,” Letchworth said as his eyes bore into mine.

“Letch!” James scolded. “This ain’t the time or place for your spiteful nonsense. We is here to show respect for Marcus, and to the cause that led each of us to freedom.”

I chilled to the bone at the sight of the grave meant for Colt. Winston touched a comforting hand on my shoulder as he stepped forward and asked if he could speak a few words in honor of Marcus.

“I didn’t know dis here fellow more than a couple o’ weeks,” he began, hat in hand. “But I sure do know the kind of man he was. Marcus believed in the promise of tomorrow. Every soul standing here will carry a piece o’ dat hope into the new lives we are building without the burden of whip or chain. Ain’t always gonna be easy nor fair, but Marcus showed us dat livin’ fo’ the right o’ things can move us all in a better direction. They say winds are a-changin’, and war might set our people free. I don’t know nothin’ about such things. But I know dat women and men like Marcus, who have stood prideful and showed what we is made of, have already won a battle fo’ each of us standin’ here, breathin’ the sweet air of freedom. We owe it to him and to ourselves to live a life worthy of his sacryfice. From now on, when one of our own is searchin’ the night sky fo’ signs of the Promised Land, ol’ Marcus is gonna be up there, pointin’ the way home.”

Livie took my hand in hers. She smiled through her tears, and then raised our hands into the air. Winston took my other hand and did the same. I wept as the chain of joined hands reached to Esther Mae, James, Raizy, Corine, and farther down the line of mourners, each one raising connected hands. Not everyone joined in our promise bridge or understood its meaning, but that would be a challenge for another day.

Letchworth Lamar stood apart from the group. As the crowd whispered final prayers and began to disperse, he waved his arms to halt them. “Now, I got some words to say, and ya’ll better heed my warning. There is a half-dead man in Marcus’s cabin. Whether he’s friend or foe don’t matter. His presence . . .” Letchworth paused, and then pointed a wicked finger in my direction. “*Their* presence is a threat to every one of us, and to the town as a whole. The grave you weep over is proof of my words. Patrollers are likely trackin’ them. Do you want slave hunters led to your doorstep because of two rogue buckra? I say, Send them on their way. They don’t belong here!”

“Letch,” James said in my defense. “You are speakin’ words of hate. We got nothin’ to fear from Colt and Hannah.”

“It’s not for you to decide,” Letchworth said in a booming voice that held the group’s attention. “Follow me, one and all, to the livery, where we can decide as a town whether to open our arms or protect our interests. Isn’t that what freedom allows us to do?”

The murmuring and awkward glances among the people signaled me to make my retreat. There was no change in Colt’s condition, and when Elijah and Lillabelle left the cabin, I knelt beside Colt’s bed and wept against his shoulder. I cried for all that was gained and for all that was lost and, lastly, for all that would never be. Exhausted, I surrendered to the stillness of sleep. After a short while, the door creaked behind me. My eyes did not open until a soft quilt was tucked around my shoulders. With caring hands, Livie smoothed the quilt that was born of Hillcrest and adorned with designs created by my mother. The comfort of home warmed me.

“Aren’t you attending the town meeting?” I asked as she knelt beside me.

“I said my piece. Now I feel the need to be with you.” Livie’s eyes glistened as she lifted my hand to her moist cheek, allowing me to touch her sorrow. “Why don’t the world know how to love?”

“I guess there are those still not ready to see the possibility of us living entwined as people, rather than parted as black or white,” I said, slipping my arm around her as she rested her head on my shoulder. “But you and I know the blessing of it. And as the promise bridge, first extended by Marcus, joins with enough receiving hearts, the world will know the blessing too. His journey will never end, Liv. We will carry Marcus onward.”

Livie leaned in and kissed my cheek. We gently pressed our foreheads together, allowing our intimacy to speak words too painful to say. Eventually, she gazed upon Colt. “How is he?”

I shook my head to convey there was no change. “I cannot bear the thought of life without him. I want him to know how much I love him. If I could have him back, even if only for a moment, I would make certain he felt my love with every breath.”

“So tell him, Hannah,” Livie urged tenderly. “Make him feel your love.”

She motioned me toward Colt as she slipped out the door. I nudged up onto the bed and touched his hair, lightly at first, and then with deep, aching strokes. “Don’t you die, Colt. Don’t you let go now. I have loved you since the first time you rescued me from Twitch’s boyish teasing. Remember all those times you held my hand and soothed my heart when I ached for my mother or endured a scolding from Aunt Augusta? I shall never forget those moments. Your love and devotion helped me grow into the woman I am today, and this *woman* loves you, heart and soul. I am giving you the whole of my heart, just as you have always given me yours.”

Tears stung my eyes as Colt lay motionless. I pulled the blanket back to expose his smooth skin. His tight frame glimmered with perspiration as I rubbed liniment on his chest. With the faint bump of his heart beneath my fingertips, I spoke to him of memories we shared. Using a razor found in a drawer, I shaved the whiskers from his chin to reveal the familiar Colt of yesteryear. However, when I pressed my lips to his, their warmth and stillness tore my heart in two. A tap upon the door pulled me from my wishful fantasy.

“Hey, girl,” Livie said as she stepped inside with a group of townsfolk on her heels. “Thought I’d see how you were doin’ and found a line outside your door.”

Raizy was the first to approach me. “I mixed up some extra honey-and-tallow poultice. It may come in handy on those wounds of his.” She handed me the jar of brown salve and stepped aside to allow Corine to offer a small sack filled with roots and herbs.

“I’ll come over and boil whatever herbs you need. There ain’t an ailment I can’t treat with the herbs in this bag.”

“Thank you.” I grinned, overwhelmed by the show of support by the people of Promise Bridge. Men came with split logs and skinned game,

while the women offered countless herbal remedies to aid Colt in his recovery. More than their gifts, I deeply appreciated the message of welcome that was delivered in their generous gestures. The town meeting had served to unite them in goodwill rather than mark me as an outsider. Livie smiled as I smeared Colt's chest with mustard plaster and dripped sassafras tea on his tongue. Late in the evening, I drooped onto the rocker with the comforting sound of laughter and caring voices lulling me into sleep.

Sunlight was streaming through the cabin windows when I felt the soft tug of the quilt around my shoulders. "Thank you, Livie," I whispered. "I don't know what I would do without you." I reached to touch her hand on my shoulder. When I pressed down on the rough, large knuckles, my eyes sprang open.

The crescent scar beneath Colt's lip creased when he smiled. "You look at peace in your mother's quilt."

"Colt! You're alive!" Before I could stand, he wobbled and lowered onto one knee. I cradled his face in my hands and released tears of relief. "I was so frightened and lost without you. Thank God you've come back to me." I shifted onto my knees so I could embrace him completely. He pulled me in, as if desperate for my warmth.

"Where are we?" he asked, as I continued to stroke his hair and shoulders.

"We are in Promise Bridge. This is Marcus's cabin."

Colt stiffened. He looked around, seemingly sifting his memory until the horrible events at the militia camp darkened his eyes. "You are in mourning."

"Yes." I sniffled. "Marcus's death was a shocking blow."

He reached up and released my arms from around his neck. "I am dizzy. Is there a well where I can draw water?"

"There is a well at the top of the hill behind the cabin," I said, confused by his sudden retreat. "Sit here in the chair and I will fetch it for you."

Colt rose gingerly onto his feet. "That won't be necessary. The fresh air and movement are good for me. I suffer more from exhaustion than significant injury. Your treatment of my arm and sores prevented serious infection and complications."

“The folks in town gave me a good deal of support and guidance,” I said, clinging to his waist. The more I drew him to me, the more I sensed his inner reserve pulling away. “Don’t push yourself, Colt. Let me care for you while you take time to heal.”

“Time does *not* heal all wounds, Hannah.” Sadness dimmed his eyes as he slipped from my grasp and limped out the door. I lifted my skirt and followed him as he labored up the clover rise, toward the well. He hoisted a bucket and splashed water against his flushed cheeks. “I may need a few days to gather my strength, but then I must go.”

“Go?” I gasped. “Why? I don’t understand!”

“They say war is inevitable. If it comes to pass, the army of the Union will need doctors. I believe it’s a cause worthy of my commitment.”

His words dropped like stones into the pit of my stomach. “I prayed over you night and day. I prayed you would return to me. I want you to know all that is in my heart. How can you leave me now?”

Colt tenderly glided a fingertip along my cheek. “I know your heart well enough to understand that it is my duty to leave you with your grief.”

“But my grief is not only for Marcus; it is also for you and the bodily harm inflicted on you by Twitch. I grieve because the North is not the land of promise our friends imagined and deserved. I also harbor disappointing grief brought by those who support the cause in words but not in practice. We grieve the same things, do we not, Colt? Let us mourn and gain strength together.”

Colt leaned against the well, tormented by my reply and struggling to answer. My head swirled as I searched his eyes. Suddenly, a thought nudged my mind. I remembered a gesture made on the day he rode into town. I had dismissed it as misdirected sentiment, but it would explain his urgency to leave.

“Colt, why did you present me with Marcus’s hat when you returned him for burial?”

“Well, seeing you here . . . taking up residence, I assumed you and he . . .”

I stepped close to him and placed my hand gently against his chest. “I am here only for you, Colt. Desperate to find you, I came searching for the path that would lead me to you. Marcus stepped forward to help me.”

Colt's breath deepened, and his heart thumped wildly beneath my touch. "Seeing you appear at the encampment, coming to me in my time of need, gave me the will to fight my way free. But there in his cabin, I realized you may have been driven by loyalty and nothing more."

I brushed the curls away from his eyes. "Both you and Marcus have walked a path of great conviction and compassion. These traits stirred deep feelings of respect and admiration in me. But love is more than respect and admiration. Love is being a part of someone, and they of you. I love you, Colt. I have always loved you. You are ever present in me, and the only one who holds my heart and stirs my depths with need."

Colt burst toward me and swept me into his arms. I lifted my lips and let his mouth take mine, delicately at first, and then in glorious surrender of heart and soul. We trembled against each other, not wanting to let go.

"Please forgive me for taking so long to understand my feelings. We have been loving and devoted friends for so long. You are woven into the fabric of my very being. It was not until you left me after Livie's escape that I realized I not only love you, but am also deeply and hopelessly *in* love with you. When you said good-bye, all we were went with you. Growing up together, we never shared a breathtaking moment, as lovers often do, when friendship spills over into passion. Yet all these years, you have been a part of every breath I've taken, and in every memory I hold dear. We may not have had that magic moment, but we are already joined as one. My heart is yours, Colt. Now and forever."

"Sweet Hannah," Colt whispered, caressing my cheek and covering my face with gentle kisses. "The gift of your heart is a dream come true. Not even a golden sunset can match the magical glow in your eyes. I can barely breathe, so brace yourself, my love. . . . That moment of breathless wonder you have been waiting for has arrived."

Colt's soft lips closed over mine and he breathed me in. Elation released within me and filled the empty cracks and lonely corners of my soul. My lips begged for more as he rolled his warm mouth from mine. "What shall we do, Hannah? Under the circumstances, we cannot go home. They would persecute us as traitors."

"Having you by my side is all that matters to me." I smiled. "Home does not require a house with walls and hearth. Sometimes home is simply a

person who offers all the warmth and shelter we seek. My dear, precious, Colt . . . you are my home."

A wistful giggle came from behind us. "Lordy, you white folk sure do drip with honey and flowery words." Livie smirked at us devilishly as she walked our way. "A big ol' hungry kiss could have solved this long ago."

I put my arm around her and eased her to my side, so grateful for our friendship. She looked at me with inquisitive tenderness and then studied Colt for a moment.

"Do you mind if I throw a thought into the breeze?" She looked over her shoulder as the whole of Promise Bridge stretched below us. Her face was clear and thoughtful as she spoke. "Here is a town without a doctor. A town of courageous people, where you can use yo' skills for the good. And there are sweet boys and girls who need a teacher to learn them to read and write. Only the two o' you can decide if you were brought here for a reason. There is no guarantee a town like ours will survive in the shiftin' winds. 'Tain't gonna be easy, but Marcus always said, 'You never know how much gumption you got inside until somethin' pokes you hard enough.' "

Colt gazed out over the valley and then down at me with a thousand questions glimmering in his misty, gold-flecked eyes. Premonition of purpose sparked alive in me.

"You are needed, Colt. By me and by this town. We may have lent these brave trailblazers a momentary hand in their journey to freedom, but we must also acknowledge responsibility on the road ahead. Livie is right when she says the future of this town is precarious. The time has come for us to step from the shadows and serve as a bridge into a resistant society. This beginning must take hold for the journey to continue."

Colt lifted a strand of hair from my cheek and tucked it behind my ear. His fingers brushed softly across the nape of my neck and up under my chin. He brought my lips to his with warmth and certainty, and then released them long enough to whisper in my ear, "I love you, Hannah. Marry me, and let our commitment of togetherness spread to those around us. Fate has brought us to Promise Bridge. Love and friendship will root us here."

I held his face in my hands and kissed his tears. "It would honor me to be your wife and join with you in heart and intent. My dear, sweet Colt, let us begin anew."

Livie nodded with a proud grin as I took her hand in gratitude. After a tender pause, Colt smiled and offered me his arm. With hope and commitment bonding us, the three of us descended the hill, each of us harboring the promise of a better tomorrow.

Authors' Notes

Imagine fleeing the only home you know, alone, with nothing but the ragged clothes on your back. Without shoes or map, you tread through murky nights along landscape you have never seen. What horrors lie in wait? Hungry and exhausted, you stumble upon a rattlesnake in the brush, and fight deadly fever in the swamps. Man and beast are unleashed in your wake, determined to track you down and drag you back, dead or alive. The truth is, you have no idea where you are going or where you will end up. Yet what you are escaping makes the treacherous journey not only worth the risk, but the lesser hell.

The first time I recall hearing the term *Underground Railroad*, I was a schoolgirl conjuring up images of a hidden rail system that runaway slaves hopped aboard like hobos. Better still was the picture of a long, underground tunnel used by the enslaved to run South to North, if only they were lucky enough to find it. Those myths were quickly dashed upon reading about the legendary Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, during which I learned that the Underground Railroad was a secret network of escape routes, organized in some areas, while spontaneous and opportunistic in others. The routes were land based as much as sea driven, and conducted by whites, blacks, and Native Americans alike. The "system" was ever changing, taking as many forms as there were attempted escapes, failing as much as succeeding, and always with the threat of recapture, vicious punishment, torture, and death. I do not profess to be an expert on the Underground Railroad, but I am an admiring believer in its power to unite for common cause and awed by the courageous spirit driving it forward in the changing face of a nation.

Although there is some debate as to the origin of the metaphor, it is said that a slaveholder, upon closing in on a runaway slave, only to have him slip away, never to be seen again, declared that it was as if the slave disappeared on some kind of underground railroad. The name stuck, and though not widely used during the height of runaway activity, later became the descriptive term for the integrated, secretive freedom movement that stretched from Eastern ports like Philadelphia across the country to

Cincinnati and points west. Its veins began in the deep South, flowing northward to the free states, and eventually into Canada, when the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 allowed slaveholders to reclaim runaway slaves found in Northern states and return them to bondage. During the 1800s, more than one hundred thousand enslaved Americans used some form of this network while seeking their freedom. The Underground Railroad was the best of America within the worst of America.

Although countless names and deeds associated with this widespread network were well hidden and have since been lost, in obscurity, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, preserves and celebrates its legacy. This amazing museum and educational facility pays tribute to and offers remembrance of the movement, beginning with the Underground Railroad and continuing forward to the challenges of modern-day slavery and issues of freedom in areas of the world like Darfur. At the grand opening of the center in 1984, former First Lady Laura Bush remarked, “This is more than a center of education, more than a memorial of remembrance or a monument for justice. The Freedom Center is a cornerstone of the American conscience.”

Each exhibit is unique and moving. I can still feel my skin prickle in their environmental theater as darkness falls, crickets twitter, and fog rolls in, enveloping visitors in a dangerous scene of escape and immersing us physically in the film *Brothers of the Borderland*. After my first visit to the Freedom Center, I remember sitting on a bench outside the entrance doors overlooking the Ohio River, scribbling my thoughts and ideas as they rushed through me and around me, leaving me barely able to keep up. I think I was first in line the next morning as the center opened its doors!

Discovering the characters of *Promise Bridge* was a moving experience. Hannah and Livie represent the best in all of us: Hannah, with her loyalty and emerging social conscience, and Livie, brave and unashamedly honest, daring to trust and reveal herself so the burdens of her fellow slaves cannot be ignored or denied. They are composites of women struggling during an oppressive time, both seeking a kind of personal freedom. Hannah and Livie find strength and courage in one another. They are not perfect, but of pure intention. Naive, yes. But sometimes naive belief is what frees us to attempt the impossible. I love their friendship. The bond between them enriches them and makes them better; their love and devotion empowers

them. Obviously, their personal struggles and exposure to danger are vastly different. Hannah's journey is internal, indicative of a woman seeking control of her beliefs and conscience at a time when women were corseted by social inferiority. Livie's plight is more urgent and life- altering. Her dream of freedom and controlling her destiny becomes a race to save her husband and child. Hannah and Livie discover something in each other that helps them overcome their obstacles and lay claim to their lives. Isn't this the blessing of a true friend?

Some of the traits found in Augusta and Colt were inspired by two well-known "conductors" on the Underground Railroad. Reverend John Rankin was a prominent figure in his community and used his advantage to shepherd runaways. Conversely, John Fairfield was born to a slaveholding family on a Virginia plantation, but detested slavery. When he reached manhood, Fairfield became very active in the Underground Railroad. Colt and Augusta are representative of a cross-section of Southern conductors whose participation in the network depended on their anonymity. Unlike abolitionists who voiced their beliefs in public forums, hoping to garner support and expand the cause, conductors provided aid under a veil of secrecy. To be found out meant possible imprisonment, physical harm, and social recrimination. The most organized networks of the Underground Railroad were often found farther north, particularly along the border states. Augusta and Colt were doing their part to move those on the run to where the networks could deliver them to freedom.

The Freedom Center is also where I discovered the story of John P. Parker, a former slave who risked his life hundreds of times crossing the Ohio River under the cover of night to ferry others in their escape from slavery. Helping those left behind was a common practice among freedmen. It is estimated that Harriet Tubman returned south nineteen times to lead as many as three hundred from their bondage. This sense of commitment and responsibility felt by former slaves for their counterparts is a lesson in humanity. The courage and determination of John P. Parker is sewn into the character of Marcus. Just like real-life freedmen, Marcus felt a duty and compassion to not only return for his sister, but for anyone else seeking the path north.

Writing the cruel and evil Twitch was a difficult process; his vile treatment of others left me angry and shamed by its truth. His character was

not based on any specific figure in history, but, sadly, was the embodiment of a way of life.

Signs and codes of the Underground Railroad were varied. Indicators used by one safe house were likely to be unique from the next. For example, one corridor might pass secret instruction to look for a man with one red feather adorning his derby who would lead them to a safe house. Or in the back hills, one might be directed to find the house with three candles burning in a window, indicating that food and shelter would be offered. This did not mean these signs applied across the South. In fact, other than the oft-noted lamp illuminating the window of John Rankin's home high above the Ohio River, there was no universal lamp-in-the-window sign. In other words, each station master signaled his or her presence in his or her own way. Their methods were secret, changing, and undocumented. This gave me flexibility in creating a network. The signs woven into the novel were unique to their system. For instance, the notion of sophisticated quilt codes is disputed by some as myth; however, in this story, quilts are used as reason for travel and worthy of hidden compartments, as well as hinting at landmarks on a route leading north. Their use is not reflective of the quilt codes hypothesized by some researchers as a form of complex communication. My quilts are merely a contributing method developed by this small group of people. Widely recognized signs, such as a white man tugging his ear when passing a slave or using the term *friend*, provided signals to other sympathizers or to a fugitive seeking a safe house. These subtle signs are used throughout the book, although they go largely unnoticed until the second half of the story.

It should be noted that large numbers of runaways struck out on their own with nothing but the simple signs of nature leading the way. Stories shared in cabins or whispered at prayer meetings gave clues to follow the "drinking gourd," the Big Dipper in the night sky, its scoop pointing to the North Star, or wade through water to hide their path from tracking dogs. They were also instructed to watch for moss, which grows only on the north side of a dead tree. These are a few examples of the environment acting as a companion to a runaway. But more often than not, nature was a brutal foe.

I love writing in this genre of what I call Pre-Civ Lit. Loosely framed between the years 1830 and 1861, the period is ripe for fiction, particularly of interpersonal discovery. Endless stories of inspiration, danger, upheaval,

and bold beginnings are waiting to be unearthed from beneath the ashes. We can tiptoe past it, hoping not to stir old ghosts, or we can choose to give voice to generations deserving of acknowledgment, tribute, and literary life, as with any other period in our history. We are entrusted to do so, respectfully and responsibly. The spirit of the Underground Railroad must never be forgotten.

Promise Bridge is not meant to preach, only to inspire. Hopefully, it brings thoughtful reflection. If men and women of the Underground Railroad could find ways to build mutual trust and cooperation in spite of their differences in the harshest of times, with potential consequences far beyond our wildest imagination, then what excuse have we today? Where are the divides in our lives? They do not have to be racial. Divides can be personal, political, religious, familial, and even internal. Bridging a divide, any divide, expands our possibilities. We are the bridge keepers, and have the ability to extend or retract. What will you do? When faced with a divide, be a bridge.

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Eileen Clymer Schwab is a first-time novelist. Long intrigued by this transitional period in history, she found inspiration in the courage of those who sought freedom, as well as the spirit of joined purpose developed with those who provided aid during their journey. She resides with her family in northeastern Pennsylvania.

READERS GUIDE

PROMISE
BRIDGE

EILEEN CLYMER SCHWAB

READERS GUIDE

A CONVERSATION WITH EILEEN CLYMER SCHWAB

Q. Writing a novel against a historic backdrop requires a great deal of research. What did you do to accurately portray place and character?
A. First and foremost, I wanted to touch and see as much as I could from and about the time period. I began at the library, where many wonderful and informative books can be found about slavery and the Underground Railroad; books chronicling Harriet Tubman, William Still, Reverend John Rankin, Henry “Box” Brown, and many narratives glimpsing the horrific institution of slavery and the secret activity born of courage and desire for freedom. I also traveled to many historic sites, most notably the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, of which I have been a member for years. This facility is like none other; an expansive, glorious tribute to freedom and probably the most extensive museum paying tribute to the Underground Railroad. I traveled through western Virginia to get a feel for the land. Places like the Booker T. Washington

National Monument, Monticello, Harriet Tubman's home, and the "Living the Experience" reenactment in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, brought pages I researched to life. There were many lesser-known sites in North Carolina and Tennessee that also contributed inspiration and helped me weave a textured setting.

My ability to breathe life into these characters was aided by the voices I "heard" while reading the slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project of 1936-1938. During Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the Works Progress Administration sent writers out to find and chronicle the thoughts and memories of former slaves, many of whom were well into their eighties and nineties. The narratives are an important piece of history that can never fade away with the passing of time. Some of the dialect and phrasing found in these narratives give credible voice to my characters.

The research phase was lengthy and continued throughout the writing of the book. At times it was appalling, and at other times awe-inspiring. However, I loved researching this project. This period of time preceding the Civil War intrigues me. I wish more was written about it, but it is not a time our nation is proud of or wishes to reminisce over. For every story told of the Underground Railroad, there were hundreds more never seen or heard. Much was hidden from sight, and passed away with a generation. Not all "conductors" were white, but those who were perhaps helped sew the initial delicate threads of healing between those cooperating and sharing risk in the activity that would become known as the Underground Railroad.

Q. The symbol of the promise bridge is strong throughout the book. Where did this concept come from and what inspired the imagery?

A. The promise bridge came to me gradually, although I sensed all along my desire for a vivid image portraying the bond between Hannah and Livie. A physical gesture that transcended words and sentimentality, and underscored a firm commitment beyond the affection of friends. What I love about the creative process is you never know what will bring inspiration, but for me it usually comes from being moved emotionally. Inspiration can come from an experience in your life, from a pain endured, a song or poem, a kindness witnessed, or a painting that stirs your soul. Yes, even a sunset. The possibilities are endless and often unexpected when they arrive.

Almost twenty years ago, I heard a song performed by The Judds (Wynonna and Naomi) that still moves me to this day. “Love Can Build a Bridge” is a hopeful, heartfelt song written by John Barlow Jarvis, Naomi Judd, and Paul Overstreet, and it reminds us we all have the power to heal a divide. From the emotion stirred by this song, the imagery of connection began to take form until one night just before sleep, I imagined Hannah and Livie with hands clasped in a promise bridge. Remembering it brings tears to my eyes because it completely captured who these two women were and what they meant to each other.

Somewhere along the way, I hope one of the artists connected to “Love Can Build a Bridge” stumbles upon my book and smiles, knowing the spirit of the song continues to have a positive impact after all these years.

Q. The depth and devotion of Hannah and Livie’s friendship is inspiring. How is it critical to their journey?

A. For me, their friendship provides the path for the journey. The novel has strong elements of suspense, and even romance, but the heart of the story beats in these two women who transcend social expectations and long-held beliefs to find promise and possibility by being entwined as people rather than parted by their differences. Against great odds, Hannah and Livie bond with each other, change each other, and ultimately save one another. True friendship is empowering and should bring out the best in us. I wanted to illustrate this sentiment without being melodramatic. Through their love and support of one another, each of these women achieves a kind of freedom.

Q. The scenes in Mud Run are quite vivid. What role does the slave quarters play in Hannah’s development?

A. At the beginning of the story, the plantation slaves are one-dimensional and move in and out of scenes much like props. This is purposeful, because we are seeing them through Hannah’s eyes. Or better stated, we are *not* seeing them, because they exist much like shadows in the periphery around her. Through Livie, Hannah gains intimate access to the slave quarters. The slaves become three-dimensional in Mud Run. They are men, women, and children; families exuding emotion. I wanted these scenes to lift from the page, so that we could touch and feel them in the same way Hannah does when her societal blinders fall away and the powerful humanity of the Runians washes over her. Mud Run is a gateway to the depth behind the

curtsies and obedient smiles, where the slaves think and act with less scrutiny, and therefore their identities and relationships are more their own. I don't think Hannah's transformation could have been achieved as powerfully at the main house or anywhere else on the plantation.

Q. Why did you choose to write Promise Bridge *in first-person prose, keeping the story completely in Hannah's perspective?*

A. As the story took form in my mind, I assumed I would write it in the third person, shifting perspectives along the way. In fact, I had never attempted to write a novel in the first person and knew it would be challenging. But from the opening sentence—"Life at its very core changed forever the day I asked 'please' of a colored man"—Hannah's voice took over, and I understood it was her account of the journey. Those exact words were the first I wrote down when starting the novel, which is unusual, because often an author goes back and wrestles with the first sentence, writing and rewriting the opening to capture the essence of the book. It is what we are trained to do. But when I sat down to begin the process, it was as if Hannah was standing there waiting for me, and I merely had to follow her. Of course, it was not quite as simple as that, but it illustrates how strong her voice was to me. And still is.

I also recognized that in a first-person point of view I could reveal an intimacy in Hannah's growth—a depth of feeling shared with the reader—and other changes that could not be matched in the third person. Did I consider writing the story from Livie's perspective? I pondered it, but this was Hannah's story to tell. I have credibility in Hannah's perspective. Would it be presumptuous of me to think I could ever completely understand the inner pain, degradation, and yearning of a slave? I think so. Those are stories to be told by others; wonderful writers who hear voices whispering to them, urging them to follow.

Q. The balance of aid shifted during the story. Was this purposeful?

A. Yes. I believe it is important to show the slaves were activists in their cause, which wasn't easy, considering their constraints and the horrible consequences if found out. They were not sitting around waiting for some sympathetic white figure to come along and rescue them from their bondage. Slaves had intricate ways of communicating and passing information to one another. Quilts, gestures, spirituals, and countless seemingly innocent and unremarkable signs that could be passed in plain

view but out of sight, so to speak. They aided each other and themselves, often running for freedom without help from anyone. Freedmen (and -women!) worked creatively and tirelessly to aid their counterparts. Near the end of novel, there came a reversal of roles for Hannah and Colt, who now needed a helping hand from those they aided earlier, demonstrating that the promise bridge flows both ways.

Q. What do you hope your readers carry away from this novel?

A. As with any author, my wish is that readers find *Promise Bridge* to be a wonderful read and a journey worth taking. That the characters resonate with them after setting the book aside. Hopefully, they will find inspiration in the spirit of the people and realize that each of us has a promise bridge within us. We need only reach out to complete it.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The book is written in a first-person point of view through Hannah's eyes. Do you feel this made the voice of the story stronger? How so? How would it be different if told by Livie or in third-person narrative?
2. What did the promise bridge mean to you and how did it expand as the novel progressed?
3. How did Hannah grow as a result of her friendship with Livie? What changes can be seen in Livie?
4. How are Colt and Marcus different? How are they the same?
5. Livie's move to freedom can be seen in a physical journey. Do you think Hannah and Colt discover a kind of freedom? How so?
6. Augusta's character takes a surprising turn near the end. What hints are woven into the story that foreshadow this change?
7. Why did Hannah feel more alive in Mud Run than she did in the main house?
8. The use of derogatory and dehumanizing terms was impossible to avoid while maintaining the integrity of the story. However, there is one divisive and notable term completely omitted. Why do you think the author has done so? Is the book more readable and discussable without this flash point?
9. Several circumstances happen during the story that change Colt in Hannah's eyes. What instances are memorable, and how did they change

her perception of him as a man?
10. Elements of friendship, suspense, and romance carry the story, with a few surprises along the way. How did the mix of these elements affect the pace of the story, and which plot twist did you least expect?
11. In the beginning, Hannah and Colt act as saviors when they help the runaways; however, in the end, the former slaves are the saviors when they free Colt from his captors. How did this reversal of aid impact the story?
12. Do you believe Hannah and Livie’s journey ends at the conclusion of the book, or did their story continue to unfold? What challenges might they have faced?